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The New Criterion

A monthly review *edited by Hilton Kramer*

Destroying literary studies *by René Wellek,* 1

Balthus: the strange case of the Count de Rola *by James Lord,* 9

Heinrich von Kleist *by Arthur A. Cohen,* 26

Willa Cather *by Joseph Epstein,* 35

Letter from London: Surreal life *by Herb Greer,* 45; **Art:** The Pearlstein retrospective *by Dan Hofstadter,* 50; **Theater:** Without feathers *by Mimi Kramer,* 62

Books: *Martin Green* Tolstoy and Gandhi, men of peace: a biography *reviewed by Nikolai Tolstoy,* 67; *William F. Nolan* Hammett: a life at the edge & *Diane Johnson* Dashiell Hammett: a life *reviewed by Dorothy B. Hughes,* 73; *C. A. Hankin, editor* The letters of John Middleton Murry to Katherine Mansfield & The short stories of Katherine Mansfield *reviewed by Bruce Bawer,* 76; **Notebook:** Frank Stella at Harvard *by Roger Kimball,* 86; To teach the administrators art *by Samuel Lipman,* 89; Auden remembered *by Robert Richman,* 92; **Letters,** 95

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Bruce Bawer's essays and reviews have appeared in *Newsweek* and *The New York Times.*

Arthur A. Cohen's novel, *An Admirable Woman,* was published in November by David R. Godine.

Joseph Epstein's new collection of essays, *The Middle of My Tether,* was recently published by Norton.

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Dan Hofstadter has translated and written an introduction to George Sand's *Story of My Life,* the February 1984 selection of the Folio Society.

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James Lord's essay, "Giacometti and Picasso," appeared in the June issue of *The New Criterion.*

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Destroying literary studies

by René Wellek

At least since the time of Aristarchus in Alexandria, who died one hundred forty-five years before Christ, a body of knowledge or, if you prefer, a "science of literature" has been built up over the centuries. The Renaissance revived and codified it and the Romantic movement gave impetus to its enormous expansion and institutionalization in the later nineteenth century. Though deep changes in methods and emphases came about in the first half of this century, one can say that literary scholarship has flourished uninterrupted—at least in all Western countries—for roughly two centuries.

One can distinguish among three main branches of literary study. First, there is theory, which is concerned with the principles, categories, functions, and criteria of literature in general. Theory is the term now preferred to the older "poetics," since "poetics" seems limited to writing in verse and has not shed the implication of prescriptive rules. Second, there is the study of concrete works of literature, which is sometimes identified with criticism or called "practical criticism" and which attempts to describe, analyze, characterize, interpret, and evaluate individual works of literature or groups of works, for example, of one author or in one genre. Interpretation is only one step in this process of criticism, though it has developed an enormous debate about its theory, for which the old theological term *hermeneutics* has been revived. And third, there is literary history, seen most frequently in the setting of political, social, and intellectual history. Literary biography is an established subgenre within literary history. These three branches of literary study implicate each other. There can be no literary theory without concrete criticism and without history; there is no criticism without some theory and history; and no literary history is possible without theoretical assumptions and without criticism.

This growing body of knowledge, immense in its ramifications, anticipates and parallels the establishment of similar disciplines, such as the study of the fine arts (sometimes included in aesthetics or developed as history of art) and the study of music, musicology, the history of music, and so on. The study of the relationships among the arts and of their common traits has been a growing concern. It leads to aesthetics and to a philosophy of art.

Today this whole edifice of literary study has come under an attack that is not merely the normal criticism of certain aspects of a changing discipline but an attempt to destroy literary studies from the inside. The attempt seems to have succeeded in certain academic circles; it has enlisted the support of a number of journals and has affected many students, apparently all over the country. It has hardly dislodged or even modified up till now the practice of the vast majority of teachers and students of literature. But it has had considerable publicity and, if it should be generally effective and find many

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adherents among the younger generation, may spell the breakdown or even the abolition of all traditional literary scholarship and teaching.

I shall try to distinguish among the different motifs and aims of the attack, which is by no means uniform or directed from a single center, either institutional or ideological.

One rather old view that has gained new prominence is the simple denial of the aesthetic nature of literature. One can doubt the very existence of aesthetic experience and refuse to recognize the distinctions, clearly formulated in Immanuel Kant's *Critique of Judgment,* between the good, the true, the useful, and the beautiful. This attack on aesthetics goes back at least as far as the German theory of empathy, as Croce's intuition-expression doctrine, as Dewey's account of art as the experience of heightened vitality, and, in the Anglo-American critical tradition, as I.A. Richards's claim that there is no "aesthetic mode or aesthetic state" or "aesthetic emotion" and that there is no difference between reading a poem and "dressing in the morning." Richards held, in *Principles of Criticism,* that "the world of poetry has in no sense any different reality from the rest of the world and it has no special laws and no other-worldly peculiarities." Since this argument abolishes the distinction between plays, poems, and novels on the one hand and didactic, expository, informative prose on the other, we arrive at the conclusion that literary study includes everything in print.

Long before Richards, of course, the study of literature was often conceived as the study of the whole history of civilization. In *Province of Literary History* (1931), for example, Edwin Greenlaw stated forcibly that "we [literary historians] are not limited to *belles lettres* or even to printed or manuscript records." This expansion of literary study has been justified, in part at least, by the fact that the branches of learning which should be studying the history of thought and sensibility and of social change have at least temporarily neglected to do so. English and American technical philosophy is notoriously anti-historical and has practically abandoned the study of the history of philosophy to English departments, to the "history of ideas" in Lovejoy's sense. And for a long time academic history departments have been preoccupied with diplomatic, military, and political events, though in recent decades one can speak of a strong revival of social and cultural history, partly under the influence of Marxism and the *Annales* group in France. Most of my own historical work is concerned with the history of ideas, with Immanuel Kant's influence in England, with the history of critical ideas, with the history of historiography and of specific key terms and concepts. There is nothing wrong with this except the danger that imaginative literature might be neglected.

But the old apprehension that literary study might be absorbed in general cultural and social history is now being replaced by a very different worry. The new theory asserts that man lives in a prison house of language that has no relation to reality. It seems to be suggested, or at least buttressed, by a few passages in Nietzsche where, for example, he speaks of "truth as a mobile marching army of metaphors, metonymies, and anthropomorphisms, illusions of which one has forgotten that they are illusions," and by an interpretation of the *Cours de linguistique générale* of Ferdinand de Saussure, who considered the referential function of language irrelevant for a science of linguistics but who did not doubt language's relation to experience and reality. In its extreme formulation, which looks for the abolition of man, denies the self, and sees language as a free-floating system of signs, the theory leads to total skepticism and ultimately to nihilism. This accusation is not simply an invention of the detractors of "deconstructionism," as it is called. It has been expressly confirmed by its practitioners: by J. Hillis Miller writing in *Critical Inquiry* (1977, no. 3); by Paul de Man, who in *Blindness and Insight* elaborates in gloomy existentialist terms the view that poetry names the void, asserts itself as "pure

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nothingness"; and by Jacques Derrida, who describes the new theory as a "Nietzschean affirmation," as the joyous affirmation of this play of the world, a world of signs, "without truth, without origin beyond man and humanism" (in *Écriture et la différance* [1967]).

The view that there is "nothing outside of text," that every text refers or defers only to another text, ignores that texts—political, juridical, religious, philosophical, and even imaginative and poetic—have actually shaped the lives of men and thus the course of history. Denying the self and minimizing the perceptual life of man, the theory deliberately refuses to acknowledge that the relation of mind and world is more basic than language.

For literary studies, some consequences have been drawn that would spell their doom. If there is no distinction between imaginative literature and any other writing, if everything is a language game, the inclusive words *écriture* and "text" allow the claim that the critic is equal to the creative writer. A critic can feel himself to be on the level of Dante or Shakespeare. Actually, some of the new critics compare themselves and their friends constantly with the greatest names of the past, speaking in the same breath of themselves and of Carlyle, Ruskin, or Pater. They revive the idea of "creative criticism" propagated by Oscar Wilde. No doubt there are aesthetic features in much critical writing: composition, style, evocative skill, and so on. And there were and are critics who feel strongly that they are artists expressing or displaying their personalities. Friedrich von Schlegel, William Hazlitt, and Sainte-Beuve are obvious examples, and Oscar Wilde flaunted ostentatiously the view of the critic as artist. But the new view goes much further: it wants to make criticism indistinguishable from fiction and it does not recognize that there is a definite work of literature out there (whatever its mode of existence may be) which has to be understood, which challenges and imposes on us. In the new theories there is no object but only an event in the mind—or, rather, in the language—of the critic. The critic engages in a free play with language.

Jacques Derrida is the philosopher who, for American students, has formulated this view most impressively. He rejects the whole tradition of Western thought, which he labels a "metaphysics of presence," by "presence" meaning its reliance on ultimate concepts such as Being, God, consciousness, self, truth, origin, and so on. He propounds the preposterous theory that writing precedes speaking, a claim refuted by every child and by the thousand spoken languages that have no written records. His view can be defended only by giving "writing" a deliberately deceptive new meaning. He argues that all philosophy is shot through by metaphors, ambiguities, "undecidables," as is all literature and criticism. This view was welcomed by some literary critics and students as a liberation, since it gives license to the arbitrary spinning of metaphors, to the stringing of puns, to mere language games. The model praised to the sky is Derrida's *Glas,* which presents, in two columns, a string of quotations from Hegel's *Philosophy of the Right* alongside Genet's *Journal of a Thief.* As even an admirer admits, it is "a purely speculative chain of words and associations." In practice, it is a series of puns, beginning with the French pronunciation of Hegel as *aigle* (eagle) and wandering off to *seigle* (rye), the field the thief crosses, and to *sigle* (sign). The book falls between three stools: it does not give an aesthetic experience, it is not literary criticism, and it is not good philosophy. It is at most a display of ingenuity and wit, inspired (possibly) by Heidegger's etymologizing punning, by *Finnegans Wake,* Dada, and Surrealism. If this were an isolated instance of the whim of a learned man, it might be harmless. Unfortunately, it has been widely imitated, with less wit and learning, and has encouraged utter caprice, extreme subjectivity, and hence the destruction of the very concepts of knowledge and truth.

In practice, of course, these absurd consequences are often avoided by theorists inventing new techniques or by their diverting

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attention to newly formulated problems. Thus, "deconstruction" is often an ingenious uncovering of ambiguities, contradictions, and inconsistencies in diverse texts, along with the monotonous conclusion that every work of literature is only "words about words," literature about literature. These writers have only just discovered an old and simple truth—that words are not things. Some time ago, Jonathan Swift satirized the project of carrying around "such things as were necessary to express the particular business they are to discuss on." These new critics refuse to understand that words designate things and not only other words as they argue.

I am no defender of the Realist dogma. I have advocated the view that Realism is only one possible style of literature and I have always recognized the fantastic, the Utopian, the grotesque, the symbolic, and many other modes of representing reality. But literature does represent reality, however distorted and transformed. It both projects a world of its own creation and tells us something about our world. The deconstructionist theory is a flight from reality, and from history. Paradoxically, it leads to a new, anti-aesthetic ivory tower, to a new linguistic isolationism. Actually, the deconstructionists often ignore modern technical linguistics. In the writings of Paul de Man, for example, "deconstruction" amounts to a study of rhetoric, understood not as a technique of persuasion but as a study of figures and tropes, metaphors and metonymy. The entire question of meaning is bracketed. Thus, at least the rudiments of literary study are preserved, as the texts of a few suitable authors are attended to: Rousseau, Nietzsche, Proust, Mallarmé, and Rilke. There is no pretense here of creative criticism.

The second prominent motif of the new trends is abolition of the authority of the text, the rejection of the whole ancient enterprise of interpretation as a search for the true meaning of a text. We have learned since the New Criticism to look for ambiguities and paradoxes, and Ingarden and others (myself included) have defended the view that an accrual of meaning occurs in the course of history. The possibility exists of a conflict of interpretations that cannot be completely resolved in some cases, though there is always a limit to the freedom of interpretation. All this has been endlessly debated by E. D. Hirsch, who defends the criterion of the author's intention and the prescriptive role of genre, by J. P. Juhl, who believes that there is only one correct interpretation, and most learnedly by Hans Georg Gadamer in *Wahrheit und Methode* (1960) and a whole new German school of hermeneutics. The so-called *Rezeptionsaesthetik* or reader-response criticism has shifted attention away from the work of literature to the process of reading, to the audience. In the theory propounded by the Konstanz group (mainly Hans-Robert Jauss, a learned student of medieval French literature, and Wolfgang Iser, a specialist in the English novel) we hear of a "fusion of horizons" between that of the reader or interpreter and that of the work of art. It is a compromise between the present-day assumptions and the historical definiteness of a work. *Rezeptionsaesthetik* recommends some good things: paying attention to the history of taste and criticism (which, needless to say, I fully approve) and to the implied reader addressed in the text. But the theory is unable to bridge the gulf between these two problems: the reader reactions and the signs of historicity—parody, imitation, allusion, conventions—embodied in the works themselves. In practice, *Rezeptionsaesthetik* lands in extreme relativism, though the emphasis on certain neglected aspects of readers' reactions seems to me welcome. But the theory of this school is not as new as it claims and is hardly a panacea for the presumed ills of literary history.

The most influential American reader-response theory, that of Stanley Fish, is another matter. It comes in several versions: in its most radical formulation it assumes that a work is completely contained in the sequential, linear reading process. It is a protest against what Fish regards as the

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reification and illegitimate spatialization of such concepts—or, rather metaphors—as the "verbal icon" or "the well-wrought urn." It has led him to make—in *Self-Consuming Artifacts* (1972)—farfetched, forced, and sometimes demonstrably mistaken readings of seventeenth-century texts. It is restated theoretically in his 1980 collection *Is There a Text in this Class*? There we are told that texts are so undetermined that we cannot decide their meaning at all, that "no interpretation can be said to be better or worse than any other." Thus, "interpretation is not the art of construing but the art of constructing. Interpreters do not decode poems: they make them." More recently Fish has seen that his theory leads to complete anarchy and extreme subjectivism, a consequence he tries to obviate or circumvent by an appeal to "interpretive communities." But he merely worsens the situation. By absolutizing the power of assumptions, he empties literature of all significance. Great critics have fortunately eluded "interpretive communities," resisted or contradicted them. Fish's theories encourage the view that there are no wrong interpretations, that there is no norm implied in a text, and hence that there is no knowledge of an object.

A few reflections should refute this view. There are patently absurd and wrong interpretations, for example, that Hamlet is a woman in disguise or that Hamlet is "mainly King James I," as Miss Winstanley argued. There are interpretations that can be shown to be wrong. For instance: D. H. Lawrence in his comment on Dostoevsky's "Legend of the Grand Inquisitor" in *The Brothers Karamazov* interprets Christ's kissing the Grand Inquisitor as meaning his acceptance of the Inquisitor's views, "Thank you, thank you, you are right, old man." But the kiss is rather the silent answer of religion that rejects and refutes the Inquisitor's diatribe. Alyosha immediately afterwards kisses Ivan, forgiving him for his atheism and Ivan reacts, "This is plagiarism from my poem." The rest of the book, the story of Zosima and Brother Markel, confirms this. Dostoevsky's journalistic writings confirm it and so do all the later novels. One can thus correct mistaken interpretations by appealing to the context of a book, of an author's work, and finally of a whole tradition. There are also, one should admit, puzzling cases. The end of *King Lear* has led to opposite conclusions. Blake's "Tiger" and Wordsworth's Lucy poem "A Slumber Did My Spirit Steal" have excited heated disagreements. But even here it is possible to adjudicate the differences: to explain them by the different approaches and implied assumptions of the interpreters. The Hegelian concept of tragedy assumed in A. C. Bradley will lead to different conclusions than will the Sartrean existentialist concept assumed in Jan Kott's *Shakespeare Our Contemporary*. Still, there are works or passages that are ambiguous, indeterminate, and even opaque and incomprehensible; but that should be a spur to discovering meaning rather than an argument for surrender. The otherness of a text, removed in time or place or both, or simply alien to our way of thinking, is a challenge to interpretation. To draw completely skeptical conclusions is simply to doubt the very possibility of knowledge, to deny the ideal of man ever understanding himself or other human beings and their creations. The world may be dark and ultimately mysterious, but the mind of man is not so narrowly limited that it cannot understand and illuminate its own creations. Vico, in the early eighteenth century, knew that, while nature may be impenetrable to man, we can have certain knowledge of our own works in history, in poetry, and in institutions. The recent attempts to increase our self-consciousness, to make us aware of our own situation in time and place, to see the "presenticentric predicament," to use the unlovely coinage of A. O. Lovejoy, is valuable if it diminishes rampant subjectivity and makes us more tolerant of other viewpoints. But it can also have a paralyzing effect, turning us into the famous centipede that did not know which foot to put first and thus encouraging the suppression of personality, which, whatever its excesses, is after all the source of insight and judgment.

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This ideal of impersonal objectivity is only one of the motives for the current dismissal of evaluation in literary criticism. Evaluation used to be criticism's central task. It has been dismissed by a new group of students of literature with completely different assumptions: by would-be scientists, mainly linguists, by semioticians and some structuralists, and by Northrop Frye, who erected a complex system of archetypes that obliterates the distinction between the most trivial detective story and a play by Shakespeare. Evaluation seems especially irrelevant to these system builders, who are looking for examples of structures to incorporate in their schemes, scientific or imaginative. Recently evaluation has also been attacked as "elitism," as a defense of the tradition, and even as a method of oppression. But a little reflection should show that evaluation is a basic task of literary study. There is an insuperable gulf between great art and real trash.

The day-to-day task of criticism is the sifting of the enormous production of books, and even the ranking and grading of writers. That we teach Shakespeare, Dante, or Goethe rather than the newest best-seller or any of the romances, Westerns, crime, and detective novels, science fiction, and pornography on the racks of the nearest drugstore is an act of evaluation. We exercise choice the minute we take up even a classical text whose value is certified by generations of readers, in deciding what features we shall pay attention to, what we shall emphasize, appreciate, and admire, or ignore and deprecate. It is now unfashionable to speak of a love of literature, of enjoyment of and admiration for a poem, a play, or a novel. But such feelings surely must have been the original stimulus to anyone engaged in the study of literature. Otherwise he might as well have studied accounting or engineering. Love, admiration is, I agree, only the first step. Then we ask why we love and admire or detest. We reflect, analyze, and interpret; and out of understanding grows evaluation and judgment, which need not be articulated expressly. Evaluation leads to the definition of the canon, of the classics, of the tradition. In the realm of literature the question of quality is inescapable. If this is "elitism," so be it.

Recently, arguments have been advanced in favor of subliterature, of *Kitsch,* colportage, *Trivialliteratur,* or however we may call it. Nobody can deny that a study of subliterature throws light on the history of taste, or that detective stories, science fiction, and all the other genres can be studied for structural properties and even graded by aesthetic criteria. One may very well distinguish between good, mediocre, and bad science fiction, detective novels, and even pornography. Even the most vociferous enemies of evaluation judge and rank. In his *Anatomy of Criticism,* whose "Polemical Introduction" denounces value judgment and hopes for a "steady advance toward undiscriminating catholicity," Northrop Frye speaks of Aristophanes's *Birds* as "his greatest play" and of Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy* as "the greatest Menippean satire in English before Swift." The mere fact that Frye and others have elected to study Milton rather than Blackmore, Shakespeare rather than Glapthorne, is sufficient to show that there is no criticism or even literary history without choice and judgment. Recently, we also find an influential critic, Leslie Fiedler, advocating in *What Was Literature?* a reversal of the canon, praising pulp science fiction, hard-core pornography, and fiction "not accepted in the canon of o.k. art": Conan Doyle, Bram Stoker, Rider Haggard, Margaret Mitchell. Fiedler is convinced that narrative skill and mythopoeic power are independent of formal excellence. Despising "upper-class" art and embracing "pop" art, Fiedler rejects his early admirations as so much hypocrisy. But even he has to make distinctions and evaluations. Though he tends always to side with the underdog, the proletarian, and the black man, he condemns Alex Haley's *Roots* as "prefabricated commodity *schlock.*" But he has not told us why there should be, in what he considers upper-class art, no masterpieces to be pointed out and ranked, as he has ranked the examples of pop art he admires.

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The need for evaluation is also obvious in literary history. In recent decades, literary history has often been dismissed as concerned only with the accumulation of external facts: bibliography, biography, influences, reputations, and so on. It has been ridiculed as a catchall of information on all subjects, as trivial antiquarianism. I count myself among the severest critics of literary histories (in reviews of Legouis-Cazamian's, A. C. Baugh's, and Grierson's histories of English literature and R. Spiller's *Literary History of the United States*). Many attempts have been made to remedy this situation. I must sketch the history of literary historiography to make the present situation comprehensible. There is a romantic tradition of nationalistic histories that sees literature as the expression of the national mind; there is a school of social explanation formulated memorably in Hippolyte Taine's triad—*race, milieu, moment*; finally, there are the schemes of internal evolution devised by Ferdinand Brunetière on the analogy of biology and by the Russian formalists and Czech structuralists who saw literary evolution as a dialectical process of shifts in structure. Little to my mind has been added to these schemes that is really new. T. S. Eliot's interpretation of the tradition has changed the evaluation of specific periods, styles, and groups of writers in the history of English poetry but has not changed the practice of literary history. The numerous writings of Harold Bloom have recently given a new twist to old problems. He is obsessed by the "burden of the past" (a phrase used in the title of W. J. Bate's book on the English romantics) and by what he calls "the anxiety of influence," the poet's revolt against his predecessors. Bloom restates the old convention-revolt problem in psychoanalytical terms: the poet has an Oedipus complex; he wants to slay his poetic father. "True poetic history is the story of how poets have suffered other poets," Bloom says in *The Anxiety of Influence.* He makes elaborate distinctions among the ways a poet handles his relation to older poets, inventing fancy terms—*tessera, kenosis, daemonization, askesis,* and *apophrades*—and describing the whole history of poetry as "an endless civil war, indeed a family war." His criticism is "antithetical, revisionist," carried by prophetic pathos in defense of "visionary" poetry, the line he construes—in conscious antithesis to T. S. Eliot's—from Milton via Blake and Shelley to Whitman and Wallace Stevens. Unfortunately, this very individual scheme is marred by Bloom's adherence to the view that all interpretation is misreading ("misprision") and that "the true poem is the critic's mind." But Bloom cannot share the deconstructionists' rejection of poetry's relation to reality. "The theory of poetry is for him the theory of life," to borrow his quotation from Wallace Stevens.

The abolition of aesthetics, the blurring of the distinction between poetry and critical prose, the rejection of the very ideal of correct interpretation in favor of misreading, the denial to all literature of any reference to reality are all symptoms of a profound *malaise.* If literature has nothing to say about our minds and the cosmos, about love and death, about humanity in other times and other countries, literature loses its meaning. It is possible to account for the flight from literary studies in our universities. I am of course aware of other reasons, mainly economic, but the emptying of human significance, the implied nihilism, must be contributing to the decline of the appeal of subjects like English and foreign languages and encouraging the preference for more palpable and palatable subject matter not only in the sciences and their utilitarian applications but also in the social sciences, which are still concerned with a nonlinguistic reality.

I would be misunderstood if I were seen simply as a *laudator temporis acti,* as recommending a return to the unreflective literary history that dominated the American universities when I first came to this country in 1927. After all, I wrote (with Austin Warren) *Theory of Literature* (1948), the first book in English with this title. In it I discuss the Russian formalists, Ingarden's phenomenological analysis of the work of art, Czech

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structuralism, German *Geistesgeschichte* and stylistics, and other Continental developments. Long before, in 1937, I got involved in a controversy with F. R. Leavis whom I had criticized for his boastful empiricism, for being suspicious of any theory. In the last chapter of *Theory* (later deleted), I criticized the American academic situation quite harshly. I cannot be suspected of enmity toward theory or Continental developments.

There is a recent book by an Englishman, Geoffrey Strickland, *Structuralism or Criticism?* which puts the choice bluntly, voting for criticism in Leavis's sense and rejecting structuralism mainly for its ambition to construe a closed system of literary signs. I agree with him on this point and can quote Hugo Friedrich, the eminent German *Romanist,* who wrote in 1967: "there cannot be a scheme or system, which would consider all phenomena of literature as limited by internal relations and combinations." But I don't see what can be said against the less universal structural analyses of Mukařovský, Genette, Todorov, and Lotman. There is a new poetics in the making, particularly of the novel, called "narratology," which has profited from the structuralist approach. Strickland's *Structuralism or Criticism?* poses a false dilemma. The enterprise of structuralism, first clearly formulated by the Prague Linguistic Circle in about 1935, seems to me fully justified. It is inconceivable, however, without the criticism of concrete works, without analysis, interpretation, and ultimately evaluation. I cannot agree with Jonathan Culler, an enthusiast for structuralism, who says in *The Pursuit of Signs* that "the interpretation of individual works is only tangentially related to the understanding of literature." Only the collaboration, the exchange and necessary interaction of criticism and poetics, can guarantee a healthy development of literary studies. I reject the theories of some structuralists and post-structuralists who advocate "the abolition of man" (whatever that may mean), who are content with the presumed "prison house of language" and claim a complete systematization of all literature. Nor can I sympathize with the blurring of the difference between imaginative literature and criticism. I cannot advocate either a return to the anti-theoretical, almost instinctive kind of criticism practiced, say, by F. R. Leavis or Yvor Winters. I sometimes feel guilty of having helped to propagate the theory of literature. Since my book, theory has triumphed in this country and has, possibly, triumphed with a vengeance. Still, I approve the basic impulse behind theory of literature, the need for clarification of principles and methods, for an articulated rationale of literary study. But some of the recent developments in their extreme skepticism and even nihilism would destroy this ideal, "deconstruct," as they say, all literary study, interrupt tradition, dismantle an edifice built by the efforts of generations of scholars and students. Fortunately, one may hope that this new "absurdist" wave, as Hayden White has called it, has already crashed on the shore, even though its propounders still believe that they ride its crest.

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Balthus: the curious case of the Count de Rola

by James Lord

When the English art critic John Russell was preparing an important retrospective exhibition of works by Balthus for the Tate Gallery, London, in 1968, he was instructed by the artist to state in the catalogue, "Balthus is a painter of whom *nothing is known.*" This extreme craving for privacy seems peculiar, especially on the part of an artist, an individual, after all, whose overriding purpose in life is to secure public appreciation of endeavors which inevitably reflect the innermost aspects of his being. It is an odd fact, though, that many artists have been secretive. Perhaps they have feared that the overt quest for admiration was already revealing too much, betraying secrets which had best be kept from the world, and even from themselves. The very willingness to exhibit creations produced in circumstances which are the ne plus ultra of privacy presupposes a certain tendency toward exhibitionism, an inclination akin to that which impels children to seek adult approval of make-believe playthings and imaginary dwelling places. Children, too, are secretive, of course, but they seldom advertise it and tend to avoid situations whereby their fantasies run the risk of grown-up consequences. An artist who seeks to make a mystery of himself seems to be playing at blind man's buff with the far greater mystery which it is his professional purpose to unmask. Creation goes hand in hand with revelation, and the fullest measure of the former comes from a candid profusion of the latter, while common sense advises that the creator's personal life is paltry stuff compared with the great existence expected of his work. Having created it, moreover, the very best he can do by it is to die.

Michel Balthazar Klossowski was born in Paris on the twenty-ninth of February, 1908. That accident in the date of birth—assuming that any occurrence in the enactment of a calling can be accidental—has allowed the artist to regard his maturity somewhat as a prolonged childhood and adolescence, because the number of his actual birthdays has till now been only eighteen. All during his early manhood he delighted in calling attention to this natal singularity, suggesting that it did, indeed, guarantee enduring access to the pristine enchantments of youth. More recently, though, he has grown chary of such intimations, the fewness of birthdays having not diminished the accumulation of years, and he has resented revelation of the date, however singular. If, as Baudelaire remarked, "Genius is childhood recaptured at will," the conquest becomes increasingly tricky as the decades grind on, because great purity of spirit and tenderness of heart are needed by an old man looking for triumph through the visual innocence of a child.

The little boy, nicknamed Baltus by his parents, was their second and last offspring, an older brother named Pierre having been born in 1905. The father, Erich, came of a Polish family of minor but "immemorial" nobility, and his forebears had fled abroad in

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the mid-nineteenth century to escape the partitions of their homeland by its neighbors. He was a highly cultivated man, wrote a monograph on Daumier, and had aspirations, though little talent, as a painter. The mother, née Elisabeth Spiro, was also Polish, though not by birth an aristocrat, being Jewish, daughter of a cantor from Wroclaw. She, too, painted, and with considerably greater talent than her husband, signing her works Baladine. The Klossowskis were at home in intellectual, artistic circles. Among their friends were Bonnard, Vuillard, Valéry, and Rilke. An involuntary tribute to Baladine's creative competence was paid one day by Bonnard when he came to visit, saw a recent picture by her hanging on the wall, and said, "Hmm, when did I paint that?"

The family moved to Switzerland, first to Bern, then to Geneva, while the boys were still young, and it was there that Baltus grew up. Precocious, imaginative, given to reverie, he was coddled and made much of by his parents and their distinguished friends. In later life he used to say, "When I was young, I always felt like a little prince." So the disposition to conceive an aristocratic image of himself seems to have been ingrained almost from the beginning. It became more and more pronounced and productive as time passed. Rilke was one of those most impressed by the boy's precocity. "One can't imagine where he gets all his assured knowledge of Chinese Imperial and artistic dynasties," he said, and volunteered to write the preface for a little booklet of reproductions of drawings of cats executed by the thirteen-year-old artist: *Mitsou,* 40 drawings by Baltusz 3, preface by R. M. Rilke (Rotapfel Verlag, Zurich, 1921). The "z" appears to have been put on solely for the sake of this publication, as it did not stick, and it does add a livelier zing to the nickname, along with the suggestion that subtle adjustments of identity might be all to the good in the interests of art. The budding artist later painted a self-portrait inscribed "A Portrait of H. M. The King of the Cats Painted by Himself." Royal reverie was mingled with symbolic premeditation, for cats appear repeatedly in the works of the grown man, adding the suggestiveness of their own sphinx-like secrecy to scenes already enigmatic and sometimes menacing.

Well before their twentieth birthdays both Klossowski boys were back in Paris, Pierre determined to make a career in literature, arriving with an introduction to André Gide from Rilke, and Baltus resolved to follow in his parents' footsteps as a painter. He needed no introduction to the reigning artists of the older generation, having acquired entrée to the most exalted milieu by right of birth. Of the illustrious elders who counted for much in the outlook and career of the young newcomer the most important by far was André Derain. Although he had been an authentic member of the avant-garde in the first years of the century, one of the wildest of the Fauves, Derain's ferocity had faded fast: while his confreres increasingly abandoned all notion of a viable rapport with traditional aesthetic values in their stampede toward uncharted territory, he beat a strategic retreat to the rear area of proven precepts and consecrated virtues. It took some courage, plus a good deal of egotism, for Derain to do that, because it was so defiant of the contemporary trend, and left him with little to show for his strategy save a display of tactical skill, which went without saying anyway. But Derain was phenomenally persuasive about stating his case. A brilliant conversationalist and ingenious dialectician, he had the personal authority to make his professional stand seem unassailable. He presumed to be the sole champion in his generation of the continuing relevance and vitality of the grand tradition represented at its best by Titian, Rubens, and Renoir. From 1920 onward he produced myriad works in a manner clearly derived from this commitment to the conservative principle. His industry, however, brought forth not masterpieces but chic portraits, wooden nudes, slick landscapes, and static still lifes. The amazing thing is that for a long time nobody questioned either the validity of his claim or the value of the works. Even so fanatic a disparager of

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all things bourgeois as André Breton, the panjandrum of Surrealist anarchy, who categorically shat upon the art of the past, was very slow to see the fatal error of Derain's strategy: what he stood for was not the sustaining grandeur of tradition but the profitless triviality of convention. This, to be sure, was by no means obvious half a century ago, especially in the commanding presence of the artist. It is perfectly understandable that Derain might have seemed, to a newcomer in his early twenties, an admirable contemporary likeness of the great masters of the past. That is how Baltus appears to have seen him, and a profound impression was plainly made.

The youthful painter seems to have decided from the beginning to retain as the adult appellation of his artistic career the nickname he had been given as a child, signing his early works "Baltus." The "h" was added a few years later, and it is, of course, a great addition, evoking more explicitly the homage of the wise man to a miraculous child. By signing his childhood name to grown-up works of art Balthus was making a point which presumably could not be made in any other way, a point somewhat similar to the one made by the fewness of birthdays, but more insistent and telling, because an artist's signature represents a commitment no man can take lightly, binding him beyond the extent of his own lifetime to the prospective perpetuation of his good name. The means by which Balthus set out to affirm the integrity of that bond had much to do with nomenclature, and in due time he once more made the point by insisting on his entitlement to a name not his own but which again suggests a childlike fixation on the make-believe. As to the aesthetic course and creative aims he was destined to pursue, the untried artist seems never to have entertained an instant's doubt. His work was to be resolutely, and one might well say defiantly, figurative from start to finish. Though he sometimes questioned his power to attain fulfillment according to the exalted standards he had set for himself, he disdainfully dismissed the relevance of any others. His were those which had stood the test of time and guaranteed the eminence of masterpieces of the past. He revered Piero della Francesca, Velásquez, Seurat, and above all Gustave Courbet. He traveled to Italy especially to copy works by Piero on the spot, and while in Paris he so devoted himself to study of the masters he admired that their vision became almost second nature to him. Such infatuation with the past is all very well so long as it inspires a creative passion capable of self-transfiguration in the future.

Lacking in technical virtuosity, yet Balthus's youthful paintings show an instinctive grasp of spatial and structural relationships, and reveal the artist's haughty inclination to make his work reflect the world within him more vividly than the world around him. It is, in fact, almost uncanny to see how early, how positively, and how permanently Balthus's creative demiurge took control of his talents and turned them to compelling account. He obviously worked as hard at his craft as he looked at the prototypes meant to consecrate it. The lesson of the masters was learned the hard way, self-taught, by the sternest discipline and command of self, though the imperious pupil made lavish provision for the dictates of self-expression. Balthus never crossed the threshold of an École des Beaux-Arts. If he were to become a master, it would be entirely by his own doing and on his own terms. Aged nineteen, he was a beginner, and less than ten years later he had already painted a number of the pictures upon which his future reputation will stand or fall. He had developed a highly personal style and adapted it to the exploration of subject matter even more personal. Neither subject matter nor style were to evolve very much during the half century to come, as if to demonstrate yet again that Balthus had found both himself and his art once and for all in the experience and vision of youth. It is a peculiarly intimate vision but at the same time strangely aloof in its attitude toward the experience. Pubescent young girls became the painter's preferred subjects, portrayed with obsessive diligence and frequency, often nude, daydreaming or

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asleep, with cats alongside them, and sometimes in situations of overt eroticism from which an element of the sadistic is not absent. Their poses, their very expressions, frequently refer back directly to identifiable works by the masters he most admired. The dream of youth is a haunting nostalgia for the noble certainties of long ago. An aristocratic reverie pervades Balthus's paintings. However effete, however irrelevant may have seemed the criteria of the past to his contemporaries, to Balthus they remained incorruptible and sublime, it seems, precisely insofar as he could prove himself worthy of them and live up to the proud vindication of their legacy. That, as it turned out, would take some doing. Noblesse oblige.

What saved Balthus from becoming a mere pasticheur of the past, however great his talents and high his standards, was the very down-to-earth integrity of his obsession with his subject matter. It took precedence over the display of painterly skills for their own sake. It presided over the creation of the never-never land in which girls, boys, and cats, even landscapes, vases of flowers, and bowls of fruit hover outside time, outside everyday reality, bathed in an aura of ambiguous tranquillity, motionless, speechless, and yet aquiver with the vital certainty that they will dwell forever in a realm secure from the rude intrusion of common mortals. The very otherworldliness of Balthus's world, and the arrogance, the downright hauteur, with which he pictured its configurations and inhabitants were what saved him from seeming passé and drew the attention of his contemporaries. He deigned to accept it, as it was merely the most prestigious then obtainable, bringing the offer of a one-man exhibition from Pierre Loeb, the favored dealer of the young avant-garde, a man who had already made a market, and a packet, off his carefully nurtured reputation for aesthetic clairvoyance. The first one-man exhibition of paintings by Balthus took place at the Galérie Pierre in the spring of 1934, when the artist was just twenty-six years old. Though sales were not many in that period of financial crisis, people of discernment were impressed. They wondered what sort of man had created these works so hauntingly evocative of the past and yet so powerfully present in their overt depiction of fantasy and malaise.

Balthus was a loner. A self-made artist, he felt free to devise whatever inventions seemed essential to the making of his name and to invest them with the passions most profoundly relevant to himself. That was his contemporary side, promptly and appreciatively noticed by the Surrealists, committed as they were to unbridled indulgence of the unconscious. They would have been glad to welcome Balthus to their group, and it went without saying that they believed no young artist could aspire to greater distinction. Balthus didn't think so. He was disposed to accept their homage but clearly could not be bothered to participate in any of their "nonsense," and would never have submitted to the aesthetic dictates of another man, be he even so commanding a personality as André Breton. Besides, the Surrealists were very mixed up in politics, they talked revolution, preached Marx, and were on speaking terms with the Communists. That, to be sure, was the *dernier cri* for young intellectuals in the mid-Thirties. From the imperturbable vantage point of his devotion to the ideals of other times, however, Balthus viewed all this brouhaha with unmistakable distaste. As for the moral challenge inherent in the social issues of his day, he seems to have deemed it simply too vulgar for notice. His idol, Courbet, had mistakenly identified aesthetic revolution with political revolution, had left his studio and taken to the streets, whereupon he paid for his errors by a stint in prison and death in exile. No such misjudgment ever suggested itself to Balthus. He had a lordly, romantic view of his calling, and thought of the artist as an heroic, mythic figure, one still prepared to dedicate himself to a noble ideal in an age which made a mockery of chivalry, a man with the spiritual fortitude to pursue a lonely, lofty path rather than mingle in the lamentable plodding of the masses. His view was, in a

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word, Byronic. He had read *Don Juan* in its entirety in the original when only twenty and had been profoundly influenced by the lyrical, cynical masterpiece of an aristocrat too proud to bow before public opinions he despised. The Byronic view, moreover, was nicely self-sustaining, as luck would have it, since Balthus maintained that by some far-fetched familial coincidence he was related to the English lord. Affinity of spirit, in any case, was quite authentic enough to transcend the prosaic happenstance of genealogy. Unfortunately, however, the Parisian painter had no title, no fortune, and no fame. By dint of indefatigable diligence he would eventually contrive to gain all three.

The artist-hero in the image of Lord Byron was not the only source of inspiration vital to Balthus in the genesis of his persona. There was another, also literary and also English: the masterpiece of somber beauty and passionate imagination by Emily Brontë, *Wuthering Heights*. Heathcliff, its protagonist, is a romantic, almost demonic character, proud and moody. A waif, he is encouraged to frame high notions of his birth in order to compensate for its obscurity. For a time he attains the height of joy by sharing with the adolescent daughter of the man who has saved him from the gutter a wild fantasy of everlasting bliss, only to have it shattered when he overhears her saying that she would feel it degrading to be wed to one so lowly, whereupon he flees the scene, eliminating himself from the eventuality of further humiliation. Balthus was fascinated by *Wuthering Heights*. The obsessive, overwrought, almost perverse relationship between Heathcliff and Cathy struck a chord of primal feeling that reverberates throughout the artist's life and work. Once again the commanding vision of creativity comes from the past. Balthus clearly identified himself with Heathcliff, for in 1933 he made an extraordinary series of pen-and-ink drawings illustrating various scenes from the novel and gave his own features to the brooding hero. The identification, moreover, goes beyond these particular works, extending into the future as a source of emotional and thematic revelation, Balthus and Brontë bound forever, as it were, in the idealistic dream of two young people romantically out of touch with reality. The *Wuthering Heights* drawings set the style, and established the very schema and poses, for painting that would not be executed until many years later. It has been noted that only the first third or half of the novel, concluding with Heathcliff's frustrated love and disappearance, engaged the artist's attention. The latter portion, when the onetime foundling reappears miraculously transformed into a wealthy gentleman of fashion, if not a genuine aristocrat, obviously did not possess the same passionate potential for identification. Or possessed it, perhaps, too much.

Balthus fortunately had the right physique for the role of the romantic artist-hero. Slender, almost gaunt, with angular features, dark eyes, and intent gaze, he was handsome. Even his good looks, though, were those of another era, and his few self-portrait drawings seem to call for the accessories and attire of a more formal time. They are the best and most accurate images of him that we have, because he has always fought shy of the camera, as of so many things contemporary, distrusting its mechanical "eye." The handsome, sensitive, moody young artist aroused passions. He was greatly appealing to women, but the passions he aroused seem to have been wanting in some essential ingredient needed for mutual satisfaction. Maybe the prospects appeared a bit too easy, and that viewpoint, too, might have stemmed from a nostalgia for the traditional notion of love as an impossible longing for an unattainable ideal. However it may have been, until the age of twenty-five no decisive emotional attachment had come between the artist and his valiant devotion to his craft.

Aristocratic by character as well as by the concept of his vocation, Balthus felt drawn to seek the company of those who were aristocratic by birth. His own, of course, might have seemed so, from the father's side, at least, but the paternal antecedents were remote and obscure, lacking in self-evident grandeur, while the maternal origins were

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definitely not made to gratify a class-conscious temperament. Despite her charm, her intellect, her talent, and perhaps in part because of all that his own endowments owed to her, Balthus felt ashamed of his mother. To be sure, it was not easy for the grandson of a cantor from Wroclaw to assume that he was the social equal of a direct descendant of a noble house dating back in an unbroken line of high rank to the Middle Ages. But he did, and if that was naïve, even silly, it also took a kind of grand, reckless purity of spirit to fancy that he would be, or need be, up to the game. And a game, indeed, is what it surely was, a further incursion into the sphere of the make-believe.

The artist regularly returned to Switzerland, revisiting the scenes of his childhood, as to a source of essential refreshment and renewal, and there in Bern in 1933 he made the acquaintance of a young woman of twenty-one named Antoinette de Watteville. Now, of the few ancient, aristocratic families which for six or seven centuries had lorded it over the canton of Bern, none was more grand or more proud of its past than the Wattevilles. Their ancestral mansion, built in a style splendidly reminiscent of Versailles, was, and remains, one of the finest buildings in the city, a symbol of power, prestige, and privilege. Antoinette was blonde, beautiful, wide-eyed, voluptuous, serene in the self-assurance of her physical and social distinction. Balthus fell madly in love with her. The Wattevilles received the intense, romantic—and penniless—young painter with painstaking politesse. He pressed his suit as best he could, pretending all the while to be entirely familiar with the way of life of people like the Wattevilles, a person to whom every little reflex of aristocratic savoir vivre was second nature. It didn't work. Even he was unconvinced, and he was the one who most seriously needed convincing. In the *Wuthering Heights* drawings, where he is represented as the morose but idealistic Heathcliff, the features of Cathy are unmistakably those of Antoinette. The Wattevilles may have been polite, but they were condescending. They smirked behind the artist's back, and he was far too sensitive and vulnerable not to sense it. The experience was desperately humiliating for a youth whose instincts and intelligence told him that the nobility of his calling far outclassed the lineage of these people who looked askance because he couldn't ride horseback like a gentleman. But his passion for Antoinette drove him to struggle against all odds to overmaster a situation in which the very odds against him were of his own making. That, perhaps, is the inevitable course for an artist. Antoinette, however, didn't care two straws whether her suitor was an artist or not. She found him unacceptable and after a while sent him packing.

This rejection had a shattering effect. It came, ironically enough, in the same year as the artist's first one-man exhibition, but there seems to have been no consolation in the prospect that his name might presently bring honor in the province of art. Fleeing from Bern in a rage of romantic agony, Balthus went back to his poor studio in Paris and there undertook to assert the supreme sovereignty of the creative personality by doing away with himself. It was only a gesture, necessary no doubt but essentially artistic, as a response to the shattering effect. The would-be suicide was discovered in plenty of time by his friend Antonin Artaud, the semi-demented, near-genius actor and writer, and the doctor said that the dose of poison swallowed had not been nearly lethal.

To an artist prepared to fly straight in the face of contemporary taste, ready to flaunt his disregard for the aesthetic temper of his times, a sentimental and social setback, however shattering at the moment, is unlikely to seem insurmountable. In fact, it may provide grist for his creative mill, and that seems to have been just what happened with Balthus. Antoinette did not disappear either from his life or from his work. In 1935 she came to Paris, where he was better able to press his suit personally and artistically. Meanwhile, in both realms he was making significant strides. He executed striking portraits of his friend Derain and his

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colleague Miró, and in 1936 an important breakthrough came when he was commissioned to paint the Viscountess de Noailles, an imposing patroness of the arts and herself a person of exceptional endowments. The portrait, too, is imposing. Though unmistakably a work of its era, it also has the timeless quality so characteristic of Balthus, and there are the familiar reminiscences of past masters—not so much Courbet this time as Velásquez—which make no secret of the artist's ambition to paint masterpieces. The viscountess was delighted, especially since the painter had made her look a bit like one of his little girls, and she introduced Balthus to her fashionable friends. In the next year he painted a picture, entitled *The Children,* based directly on a sketch of Heathcliff and Cathy, which was acquired by no less a connoisseur and celebrity than Pablo Picasso, with whom the young painter also became friendly.

His closest friend among other artists was a man seven years older than he who had already achieved some reputation as a Surrealist sculptor. Their friendship, which survived numerous contradictions and quirks for thirty years, had begun in the late winter of '34, just before the Pierre Loeb exhibition, when André Breton and Paul Eluard came to call one day at Balthus's studio, bringing with them Alberto Giacometti. The painter showed a selection of his recent works, all much admired by the visitors with the exception of one small painting which the sculptor criticized insistently, saying that he found the tonal relationships all wrong. The criticism brought a coolness, and when the callers had come out into the street again, Breton said to Giacometti, "Well, you've just made an enemy." The following summer, having traveled to Bern to make the acquaintance of Paul Klee, Giacometti went beforehand to visit the famous bearpits, where the municipal mascots spend hours on their hind legs waiting for visitors to toss them carrots. And who should he find also rapt in contemplation of the bears' ungainly acrobatics but Balthus? It was at the time of his frustrating courtship of Antoinette. So the two artists fell into conversation and though Alberto was in a hurry because of his appointment with Klee, they went to have a drink together on the terrace of the Kursaal. The conversation grew heated, calling for close attention and careful thought, since both men were exceptional conversationalists—the one self-conscious and precise, like his painting, the other visionary and impulsive, like his sculpture—and as it evolved the two found that they were in agreement about almost nothing. With most men that would have seemed good reason for leaving acquaintance slight, but with artists of the caliber of Giacometti and Balthus, who were searching for compatible relations entirely in terms of a personal vision, the challenge of a peer was irresistibly exhilarating. By the time they finished talking that summer day it was 7 P.M., Alberto had forgotten all about his appointment with Klee, and an historic encounter was missed. A dialogue was begun, however, which by its strange, almost perverse polarity gave each artist occasion to take stock of himself from a point of view profoundly concordant, though almost opposite.

Alberto was interested in the art of the past as a means of seeking his way to the future, and this was just the period when he was abandoning Surrealist fantasy in order to devote himself entirely to rigorous representation of what he saw before him. Balthus was interested in the past as a means of reaffirming past values. Alberto was preeminently a man of his own time, responsive to its philosophical, political, and cultural climate, while Balthus had little use for the present. Alberto was the frankest of men and made candor the cornerstone of his ethical concept of human relationships. Balthus loved make-believe and secrecy. Alberto revered his mother. Balthus was ashamed of Baladine. Alberto lived like a pauper because he knew that riches and possessions can rob one of life's greatest luxury: spiritual freedom. Balthus yearned for grandeur, pomp, and things that money can buy. An enumeration of differences could be made much longer. But the two were united in their un-

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compromising commitment to representational art and to the indispensable continuity of a tradition which many believed extinct. They never saw eye to eye about the best means of continuing it, and if the truth were known, which it is, they didn't much admire each other's work. The more severe was the elder, the less critical the younger. They were bound together by their passionate care, if not for one another, then for what they both represented—perhaps, too, by a community of interest in somewhat perverse erotic adventure—and by an awareness, which must have been almost as clear to them as it is to us, that they were to represent the final flowering of the School of Paris.

In 1937 Balthus completed an enormous painting, eight feet by twelve, in which half a dozen figures are shown in various poses amidst a landscape of jutting and precipitous mountain peaks. The evocation of Courbet is overt, insistent, serving notice once again that for this artist, as for his nineteenth-century forebear, the concern with painting well was incidental to a dogged resolve to paint masterpieces. Indeed, it is difficult to think of any other painter of our era whose guiding preoccupation has so clearly been the periodic production of a work conceived precisely to define itself as a masterpiece, and in this, as in so much else, Balthus proudly stands apart from his time. *The Mountain,* whether masterpiece or not, is a stunning achievement for a man of twenty-nine. The haunting, otherworldly Balthusian world is conjured up in the golden clarity and unearthly stillness of high mountain air, and right in the center of the picture, the largest, brightest figure present, her arms upraised in a gesture both ambiguous and fetching, stands Antoinette de Watteville. However he may have worked his wiles upon her, whether as a suitor or as an artist, charming both the woman and the aristocrat, Balthus and Antoinette were married in 1937. Seen in the perspective of previous humiliation, it must have appeared the definitive realization of the youthful dream. In fact, it was only the beginning.

The couple had two sons. The father kept on painting, while his work found an appreciative, and prodigiously long-suffering, dealer in New York in the person of Pierre Matisse, who held an exhibition in 1938. Little sold. War came, but Balthus was demobilized before the fighting became serious. He took refuge first in a small village in Savoy called Champrovent, then in Switzerland at Fribourg, and in both places peacefully went on painting pictures into which not the slightest hint of contemporary turmoil or anguish was permitted to intrude. When the hostilities were finished, and life in France had been revived in a style tolerably approximate to normalcy, Balthus returned to Paris. The postwar trend in taste was less than ever favorable to figurative art, but nothing so deplorably transitory could have altered the way in which Balthus saw things, and he went right on painting as before. A change, however, had come over him. It began to manifest itself in a rather peculiar way. Balthus, of course, was anything but commonplace, and prepared to go to considerable lengths to prove it.

Marriage to an accredited noblewoman had not, it seems, turned out to be as thrillingly aristocratic as the imaginative young artist had expected. The grand luster, to be sure, of Antoinette's maiden name had been sacrificed at the altar, and the husband on his own account had little to offer by way of prestigious compensation. This was galling. There was his art, yes, but that didn't seem to promise anything very opulent or even impressive for the time being. Resources were low because Pierre Loeb conformed to the contemporary taste, leaving Balthus dealerless in Paris, while Pierre Matisse, though prepared to buy pictures that did not sell, paid accordingly. Then there was another problem, which might have been foreseen, considering prospects from the outset, by anyone but those concerned. Nobody was growing any younger. Madame Klossowski was a married woman well past thirty, the mother of two not-so-little boys. Balthus, though, by the still-beguiling arith-

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metic of birthdays, was barely more than a child, and he seems to have felt an overpowering need to find a real person with whom he could enter into the kind of fantasy relationship that he entertained with himself by means of his paintings, through their subject matter, their technical and conceptual references to a vanished world, and their haughty disdain for the opinion of anyone but the artist. Just such a person was provided at just the right moment by one of those miracles which the creative temperament ruthlessly conjures up and then proceeds to consider as commonplace as the morning sun. This person was the teenage daughter of a well-known writer, a longtime friend of Balthus's, whose work included much musing on matters of erotic mystique, and of a beautiful actress who had recently taken as her second husband a celebrated psychoanalyst, himself a man of highly esoteric disposition. These adults thought it fine for the artist to take an interest in the young girl, for her to pose for him, and they presumably also felt that whatever else might transpire between them would be all to the benefit of posterity. Besides, Antoinette did not seem to mind, and she presently returned to Switzerland to a life of luxury befitting her station. As for the young girl, the benefit to her of these arrangements got rather lost in the shuffle, though the loss itself will remain resentfully present as long as she does. Of course, it was merely the loss of innocence, which remained but an image in the superb portraits Balthus made of her.

Nor was all this all the change that had come over Balthus as he approached the statistical age of forty. Very tentatively at first, almost jokingly, casually, as if the truth were embarrassingly self-evident anyway, he started putting it about that, being of noble birth, he was privileged to use the title of count. Oh, he just let the revelation slip out. His rightful name, he said, was Count Balthazar Klossowski de Rola. He didn't insist on it in the beginning, he merely seemed to suggest that the aristocratic fact might, after all, be allowed to speak, if not to whisper, for itself. To those who were listening, however, the utterance sounded strident beyond belief, and they happened to include Derain, Giacometti, Picasso, Artaud, Albert Camus, the Viscount and Viscountess de Noailles, Princess Caetani, et al. Some laughed, some sneered, some smiled indulgently, and everyone took it for granted that the artist had no legitimate claim whatsoever to a title. In that, at least, everyone was right. Titles in historic Poland were nonexistent before the partitions save for the handful of princes descended from sovereign houses of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania and counts originally designated by the Holy Roman Emperor in the sixteenth century. After the partitions a few titles were accepted, or bought, from the Austrian emperor or the Russian czar. There was, however, a genuine aristocracy, defined by relationship to senatorial office, and its members had often assumed titles suited to their style of life while traveling abroad in the nineteenth century, a time when titles still designated economic, social and, one might almost say, spiritual realities. But that time and that practice were far in the past in the wake of the Second World War, which only made Balthus's presumption seem more fantastical. As for the name Rola, it was an heraldic appellation applicable to families other than the Klossowskis, like a clan name in Scotland, and it rather insisted on the modesty of provincial origins, as in Polish the word refers to arable land. It conferred no title whatsoever. To this fact members of the artist's own family were embarrassingly ready to testify, and as if that were not enough, documentary evidence was, and remains, readily available.[1] In view of all this one might have thought that Balthus would drop his ongoing dalliance with the make-believe.

He did nothing of the kind. He began ever so slightly to dwell on it. His self-depre-

1 *Herbarz Polski* by Adam Boniecki, Gebethner and Wolff, Warsaw, 1907, Volume 10, page 185; *O Heraldyce I "Heraldycznym" Snobizmie,* by Simon Konarski (a work dealing specifically with pretenders to nonexistent Polish titles); Ksiegarnia Polska, Paris, 1967, page 43.

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cating smile and mocking drawl when mentioning it began to harden, so that those who heard him were given fair warning of serious intentions and of potential consequences equally serious. Many were appalled, denouncing the affectation as a lamentable lapse into the crudest kind of snobbery. Derain wanted to break off relations with his disciple, but his mistress tactfully recalled him to reality, which in his case now represented a drastic tarnish of his reputation, and told him that the only artist friends of consequence he had left, he who had known them all, were Giacometti and Balthus, so he relented. Balthus didn't. He kept on allowing it to be understood that he was a count. If people laughed behind his back, he could not be bothered to notice. Besides, he had always been proud. People did laugh, and they said that the painter was an unconscionable snob whose noble pretensions made him look like a fool. Had they looked more closely, they might have seen that neither foolishness nor snobbery could account for an idiosyncrasy so overt on the part of an artist as secretive, subtle, and refined as Balthus.

The issue of the title per se was in a strange way beside the point, though it pointed precisely to what was central, because every artist's responsibility as well as his license is to create a self capable of creating the art necessary for the sustenance of that self. In Balthus's case the aristocratic pose did not signify a vulgarity of spirit. On the contrary. Aristocracy clearly represented for him a distinction of personal bearing that reflected the integrity of his commitment to standards and values which had prevailed when titles still meant something. Moreover, it was a way of emphasizing not only his detachment from the aesthetic fashions of the day but his positive loathing for them. And further, it was a way of asserting that childhood dreams can come true, since the man who painted the portrait of the Viscountess de Noailles knew very well that by doing so he had made a more vital contribution to the spirit and tradition of aristocracy than ever that lady did by bearing her title and name.

But even all this was neither all nor enough. Balthus had already before the war secured as a studio in Paris a couple of splendid rooms in a grand old building that had once been part of the residence of Diane de Poitiers, mistress to Henry II, King of France. He wearied of it. He wearied, in fact, of the bustle of Paris, where it became increasingly difficult after 1950—even in the ancient neighborhoods Balthus favored—to sustain a credible and fruitful identification with the past. He wearied also, it must be said, of the young girl, who showed disconcerting signs of having grown up, and had herself become weary of serving as model for fantasy visions of eternal youth. The artist felt due for a change, while the nobleman hungered for it. What was wanted was a castle, a place both secure and imposing, where Balthus could live in peace with all the dreams and ambitions—both obvious and obscure—befitting his vocation. If, as it has been said, the hallmark of a true aristocrat is to have grand aspirations, Balthus had them to burn, and he made no bones about it. He roundly asserted, "I have a greater need for a château than a laborer for a loaf of bread." It was a *bon mot,* of course, but most people thought it in pretty bad taste. Besides, it was not a joke. And who are common mortals, after all, to evaluate the legitimate needs of the creator? So the Count de Rola traveled around the provinces, searching for a suitable residence. Châteaux in those days were a dime a dozen. There was one called Meyrargues, a superb fortress perched above a valley near Aix-en-Provence, but the price was also high, and a new roof was needed. It later became a hotel. Dora Maar, Picasso's recently repudiated paramour, proposed a handsome alternative in the village where she spent her summers, adding, in the hope of making it more attractive, that the property traditionally brought with it a title. Balthus said, "Oh, titles? I've got a surplus of those." The place was subsequently purchased by another painter, one who also bore a prestigious name: Nicholas de Staël, who never laid claim to any nobility other than that of his métier, which, alas, he did not find sufficiently uplifting

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to keep him from suicide a few years later.

The search for the château was made difficult by two things: the searcher didn't have a dime to his name, and the genuine artist had requirements just as exacting as the make-believe count. Everything considered, and in fair view of the muchness which everything entailed, the place that Balthus finally found seemed nearly ideal. Art made it so, in any case. As châteaux go, Chassy didn't amount to much. Standing on the down slope of a small hill, overlooking a perfectly ordinary little valley on a back road halfway between Paris and Lyon, it was merely a very large house, with round towers at each corner, in a quite mediocre state of repair. But it was for rent, not sale, and the rate was low. There was no garden, no park, not a single fountain, urn, or stately vista, and the approach was marred by an utterly vulgar farm. At least, however, the peasants consented to address the newcomer to the château as "Monsieur le Comte." The interior was unfurnished and unheated. Breezes whistled under loose-fitting doors. The roof leaked. There was no telephone. The nearest village, a hamlet called Blismes, was several miles distant. To settle for Chassy took exceptional force of character and an inflexible determination to make the workaday routine of life obey dictates of high imaginative purpose. Amenities meant nothing viewed in the perspective of a dedication which dismissed mere happiness as an uncouth irrelevance insofar as it had any bearing at all on the pursuit of man's noblest fulfillment. That pursuit took Balthus to Chassy, and some people said that the itinerary was absurdly circuitous, but nobody could say it failed to take into account the potential grandeur of the destination. What Chassy had to offer was space, both actual and ideal. There were vast, high-ceilinged, well-lighted rooms, in which it was possible to see and to conceive works of art free from the constraint of twentieth-century confusions and preconceptions. Balthus believed that he was richly entitled to such space by virtue of his resolve to make good in his own time standards which nobody else had the stamina or distinction to save from present-day frivolity, mediocrity, and anarchy. On the basis of evidence put forward by this view to secure its own vindication, the judgment of hindsight seems to be very much on the side of the artist.

In the meantime, given an inclination to seek romantic parallels in unexpected settings, the Château de Chassy could easily have been taken for a Gallic version of Wuthering Heights. The first winters there were quite as bleak as any imagined by the melancholy Ellis Bell. (The childlike propensity of the Brontë sisters for make-believe also included a fondness for made-up names.) Someone was needed, though, to play the part of Cathy, not an easy role to fill as Heathcliff grew older and more finicky. Though she proved to be only a stand-in, someone was brought onto the scene by Alberto Giacometti, which was rather peculiar, as he was often heard to grumble, "We're fed up with Balthus and his little girls." This one, to be sure, was a bit old for him, being already in her mid-twenties, and maybe Alberto fancied there would be no drama. She was the daughter of farmers, but unconventional ones, freethinkers, if not Communists, and she wanted to make a mark in life. Having met Alberto in a café, it came out that she wanted to make her mark as a poet, although she unfortunately had to do something about earning a living. Balthus was just then setting himself up at Chassy, where his station and the size of the house called for servants. But he had little money. Alberto suggested that the poetess might do as a housekeeper. Then she could write while Balthus painted. It was an exceptionally bad idea, and everybody concerned thought it grand. For a time, indeed, the handsome, haughty artist and the sensitive idealistic poetess seem to have found life in the gloomy, uncomfortable château perfectly congenial. He painted some splendid pictures, one of them one of his most persuasive assertions in the bid to create a masterpiece, an enormous canvas called *Le Passage du Commerce Saint-André,* a view of a Parisian back alley where neither Courbet

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nor Baudelaire would have noticed anything incongruous. It is interesting to consider that in order to bring it off the painter was compelled to set up shop at a far remove from the present-day scene. The poetess, who also did a bit of cooking and dusting, wrote a collection of verse, sadly—because so inappropriately—entitled *Unvanquished Poems.* Balthus once asked her what historical person she might have liked to be. "Trotsky," she said. He tartly rejoined, "You might have chosen Lenin. He, at least, succeeded."

The artist himself, however, was for the moment far from successful. Sales were rare, prices low, collectors still the happy few, and the fastidious far between. He subsisted with some difficulty and much resentment on the dole provided by a consortium of half a dozen dealers and connoisseurs, who were willing to take a modest flyer on the chance that a nostalgia for masterpieces might one day produce some. In exchange for a monthly stipend they expected to receive the painter's entire output. But Balthus worked very slowly. It's true that he always seemed to have all the time in the world, and never appeared to doubt for a moment that posterity would make time for him. Meanwhile the château needed to be filled with suitable furniture and appointments, for which works of art had to be offered in exchange, and some members of the consortium were aggrieved to learn that canvases were being traded for curtains and couches. The painter's Parisian dealer, a woman who had once worked as secretary to Pierre Loeb, made representations. Balthus sneered, said that she was a hyena, and showed her the door. All this was most unbecoming. Nor, as time passed, did the poetess help matters by growing quite noticeably old as she approached thirty. Then the artist recalled that the wife of his older brother had a very pretty teenage daughter by a previous marriage named Frédérique, in whom he had already taken a somewhat more than avuncular interest, and it seemed to him that she might do beautifully to preside over the Château de Chassy. And by another of those convenient miracles that ease the creative life, all parties found the plan quite pleasing. Except one. The count was unconcerned for the opinion of his housekeeper. There were scenes. The poetess made an effort to end her suffering by ending her life; it was unsuccessful, for an ambulance was summoned in good time to take her to the hospital in Nevers, and the keen eye of the artist observed with sardonic merriment as the vehicle departed that the name of its proprietor painted on the door was Sépulchre.

The Château de Chassy brought out the best in Balthus, especially after the arrival of his "niece," whose girlish charm and commendable adaptability lent the place an aura of enchantment it would never otherwise have attained. Of course, an artist's vision was required to make all this believable. During his years at Chassy—less than ten, unfortunately—Balthus reached the climax of his career, painted many of his finest works, and executed scores of superb drawings. He made numerous portraits of Frédérique, who considerately remained an adolescent in pigtails till long after her twenty-first birthday. Of the ordinary little valley where the château stood, and of the vulgar farmyard in front of it, he created a remarkable series of radiant images. The Count de Rola had felt that a castle was required to house his self-esteem, and Balthus that it was the least he owed to the invaluable continuity of artistic tradition. Together they did very well at Chassy, and by it. The nobelman, the painter, the artist, and the château, not to mention Frédérique, made a beautifully composed and perfectly congruous *tableau vivant.* To be sure, it was not everybody's cup of tea, but precious few were invited to frame an opinion. It's a pity that things couldn't have gone on forever as they were then, in a state of exquisite equilibrium between artistry and aristocracy.

The public had gradually begun to notice that a painter of extraordinary powers was hidden away in that oddly nondescript neck of the woods. People started buying. The Museum of Modern Art in New York put on a retrospective exhibition in 1956, though Balthus couldn't be bothered to cross the

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ocean to see it. Creative trends on the other side of the Atlantic were, in any event, so far from congenial as to be virtually repellent, and what interested Balthus most about America was that one of his earliest and most ardent collectors there happened to be an eccentric clergyman from Los Angeles, California, where languorous nymphets may have looked right at home on the walls of the manse. Critics and collectors began arriving at Chassy to pay their respects and, if possible, purchase a picture or two. They were greeted by an Italian majordomo in a white jacket with gold braid who told them that the count was in his studio and could under no circumstances be disturbed. Fine furniture now filled the rooms and oriental carpets lay on the floors. The Baron Alain de Rothschild presented his compliments and said he would be very pleased should the count consent to paint a portrait of his wife, Mary. Balthus agreed. Ingres, after all, had painted the baron's great-grandmother. The portrait, when completed, was appropriately large and impressive, though the baroness looked rather like a gamine—like a Balthus, in short. The Rothschilds were delighted. A sumptuous reception celebrated the installation of the finished work in their mansion, where it was kept company by a couple of Rembrandts and a clutch of other masterpieces. The reception was attended by many of the noblest, most fashionable people in Paris, but few artists were present.

Then Balthus was given a boost by one of his old cronies, André Malraux, a creator also dedicated to concepts of personal glory and exalted spiritual purpose which many deemed passé, and some, in fact, outré. But in his own time he had become an almost legendary figure and was now enjoying a kind of mythic consecration as Minister of State for Culture, the favorite of General Charles de Gaulle, to whom the idea of grandeur was the stuff of life itself. Malraux believed that art exists virtually as an autonomous reality, and is thus more an outgrowth of past art than a response to contemporary stimuli. He and Balthus were made for discriminating mutual esteem. In 1961 Malraux appointed his friend director of the French Academy in Rome, an institution established by Louis XIV in the seventeenth century when the Roman sojourn and initiation had been a prestigious sine qua non for any artist who hoped to make a name for himself. The Prix de Rome was coveted as an evidence of outstanding promise until, at least, the mid-nineteenth century, and happily accepted by great and mediocre alike. Ingres was a promising winner at age twenty-one, later spending many contented and industrious years as director of the Academy. So the post came in the gratifying context of glorious antecedents and precedents. These, it's true, may not have looked like much when considered from the viewpoint of young artists overseas who regarded Picasso as effete and elevated to the rank of contemporary icon the clumsy and garish portrait of Marilyn Monroe. But such a viewpoint was precisely what Balthus considered beneath his notice, and a better refuge for his abhorrence could hardly have been found than the French Academy. Besides, Chassy had begun to seem a bit cramped. The count complained that he had barely space enough in which to contemplate with decent impartiality his achievements. He cannot, however, have failed to observe that his "niece" had definitely reached marriageable age. Removal to Rome must have appeared to offer the best of imaginable worlds, and to the Count de Rola it indubitably did. Balthus, on the other hand, forfeited a significant degree of distinction.

Standing at the brow of the Pincian Hill, the French Academy is housed in the Villa Medici, one of the noblest landmarks of the Eternal City, erected in the sixteenth century with a helping hand, so it's said, from Michelangelo himself. Its public rooms are of awe-inspiring dimension, and the private apartments hardly less palatial. But when the new director arrived in 1961, he found that the villa had fallen on hard times and showed distressingly little evidence of erstwhile splendor, though it was not in the least like Wuthering Heights. The overwhelming relevance of that novel, in any

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event, was by this time evidently a closed chapter. To restore the Villa Medici to a viable degree of magnificence, and make it into a fitting residence for one who did not balk at the dictates of nobility, became the new director's first priority, one which he pursued in person with exemplary elegance and attention to detail. He even found time to take a passing interest in the young winners of the Prix de Rome, whose aesthetic fortunes were temporarily entrusted to his supervision, though none of them gave signs of great promise and only a couple had the good taste to paint pictures that resembled his. As for his own pictures, very few were produced during these years, because the director was too busy looking after palatial appointments to paint, while the count had a very crowded schedule of official and social engagements. He also had a countess to pay attention to. A year or two after taking up residence at the villa, Balthus traveled to the Far East and in Japan made acquaintance with a young woman named Setsuko. She accompanied him back to Rome, becoming bride and countess all at once.

The craving for grandeur and nostalgia for the standards and style of a bygone age got all the satisfaction at the Villa Medici that anybody could have dreamt of, and more. Princes and princesses, cardinals, ambassadors dined at the count's table, where exquisite foods and wines were served on plates and in goblets emblazoned with golden crowns. If the count had been cautious, almost apologetic, about using his title in Paris, and even during the early years at Chassy, no circumspection prevailed in Rome. Protocol was the inflexible rule. Invitations to official functions at the villa were sent out in the names of the Count and Countess Klossowski de Rola. The French ambassador was made to understand that the director of the French Academy and his wife were unlikely to appear at receptions and dinners in the Palazzo Farnese should they fail to be received, presented, and seated with all the deference due their rank, which made things a bit ticklish for the diplomat, because there were plenty of noblemen in Rome whose ancestors had for a millennium or so been keeping an implacable eye on their places in relation to the salt. Still, the Rolas were much in demand, a great social success in Rome. Balthus was suave, witty, sardonic, an excellent teller of entertaining stories, trenchant in his judgments of art, literature, music, and manners. Setsuko was exquisitely gracious, attired in gorgeous kimonos of silk so heavy and richly embroidered that they looked as though they would stand up by themselves. The guests and friends were not all nobility, diplomats, and churchmen, either. There were also a few artists and writers, congenial spirits, and one of the closest of these, in fact, was a latter-day virtuoso of personal fantasy and erotic make-believe named Federico Fellini.

If anybody wondered what was going on in the artist's secluded studio in the villa's gardens while the count and countess were busy being sociable and aristocratic, the curiosity was neither well-received nor well-rewarded. Visitors were greeted with impeccable politesse, but even the painter's dealer, now compelled to advance enormous sums against the promise of pictures that existed only in the artist's imagination, even Pierre Matisse, frequently found the studio door denied him. It was Balthus, and Balthus only, it seems, who was in the artist's own view entitled to any reward. He had awaited it with unbending determination for forty long years, and he was resolved to have it on his own terms, since it was on those terms entirely that he seems from the beginning to have staked his belief that the reward due to great achievement must be but another aspect of the deference due to great aspiration. And certainly no one could contend that Balthus was undeserving of high esteem. But somehow or other in Rome the fragile equilibrium between aspiration and achievement went awry. Perhaps it was because while there Balthus at last came completely into his own as a self-creation commensurate with his ambition to personify and perpetuate traditions of an erstwhile order. The Count de Rola had become a real person, not a fiction, not a storybook character, and

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in the process he had somehow lost the old power to create a convincing world for the obsessive inhabitants of his imagination. Compared with the pictures painted at Chassy, the few executed in Rome look stilted and artificial. They are works of exceptional formal skill and refinement, needless to say—Balthus has never known how to be vulgar—but the onetime passions and life-giving fantasies are gone, leaving behind only self-indulgent, decorative reminders of a simpler day, signed with the same name though not by the same man.

Balthus lingered on in Rome. The original term of his appointment expired, but he managed to get it renewed. The villa hadn't yet been restored entirely to his taste. And then there were the gardens, too, which were grandly entitled to attention. Hadn't Velásquez painted there? So the count lingered on. Something about the Eternal City held him. Maybe it was in part the memory of one of his ancestors, Jacob Maximilian Klossowski, sent by King Ladislaus IV in 1643 to administer the Polish Church of Santo Stanislav, a charge he tenaciously held despite havoc at home until his death thirty years later. Rome is the city in the western world richest and most imposing in a continuous accumulation of art and history, of cultural, intellectual, and spiritual associations. The artist and the nobleman felt comfortably at one with it and with each other in it. The time would fatally come, however, when directorship of the Academy must pass into other, less illustrious hands, and against the anomaly of that day Balthus looked around for an alternate residence. He found something north of Rome, not far from Viterbo. Called the Castello di Montecalvello, it was a very large, ancient, and patrician pile, more in need of repairs and appointments than Chassy had ever been. This time, though, there was no want of money. At the very moment when the artist's powers had begun to flag, the prices of his works took a leap and have never since ceased climbing. The old consortium had long since been disbanded, but their flyer had turned out to be really meteoric. When at last a new director was named to the Villa Medici, Balthus blandly informed him that the place couldn't be vacated overnight, owing to urgent creative commitments already undertaken. This urgency lasted a couple of years or so, while the count and countess kept on entertaining and the artist painted a few more pictures and made a lot of drawings that looked like things done long before by Balthus. Even the countess got to work with brushes and paints, and her things, too, looked wonderfully like Balthuses. So the dominion of the make-believe made itself in its own image. And then the couple had a child. A little girl. That, perhaps, was all that was needed to close the magic circle within which Balthus had lived since his own childhood anyway.

The infrequency of birthdays, however conducive to visions of youth, had failed to avert the audit of years, and one day the Count de Rola found that he was well past retirement age. After a decade and a half he was compelled to relinquish the Villa Medici. A sense of deprivation seems to have ensued, and the alternate castle didn't prove satisfying as a substitute for the grandeur of the Eternal City. Moreover, with old age staring him in the face, the artist found that he might yet want to take his chances on the advent of a masterpiece or two by getting down to some hard work. To the surprise of all except those who knew him intimately he went back to Switzerland. It was in Switzerland that he had spent the better part of his childhood, and his first great infatuation with the aristocratic principle had taken place in Switzerland. And there was even a creative association, for his most important artist friend, though unlike him in almost every way, had nonetheless been Swiss, and while director of the Villa Medici he had been able to pay homage to the memory of that friendship by organizing in 1970 a retrospective exhibition of works by Alberto Giacometti. So the final return to Switzerland was in many ways a reaffirmation. Balthus had long ago created an otherworldly world, and now the Count de Rola retreated into it and reigned over it, closing off the

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frontiers to others and insisting upon prerogatives that nobody had ever wanted to argue about in the first place. He established himself, wife, and daughter in an immense eighteenth-century chalet, reputed to be the largest in Switzerland, at Rossinière in the Canton of Vaud. It was very grand, but the atmosphere was said to be rather cheerless and lonely. Exhibitions of his work were organized, but the artist, as usual, loftily declined to appear, leaving the workaday arrangements of fame and honor to others, brusquely rebuffing the solicitations of journalists and the inquiries of art historians. In 1977, when Pierre Matisse held a large exhibition in New York, the catalogue preface was penned by the count's Roman colleague, Federico Fellini, who concluded his panegyric with the assertion that to understand Balthus is to understand the times we live in; the lesson is made plainer, he says, quoting Michelangelo, "if at the end of the day, we look inside ourselves so that we can finally distinguish the only reality possible from all that seemed real to us—invented reality." Maybe yes, maybe no.

Then the curators of the French National Museums and of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York decided jointly to mount a great retrospective exhibition intended to establish and consecrate once and for all Bathus's stature as a modern master descended directly and legitimately from those great predecessors chosen long ago by the aspiring youth as his rightful forebears. Such an exhibition requires painstaking, lengthy preparations, but for once the artist surprisingly and uncharacteristically intervened to urge the greatest practical dispatch, and the schedule was brought forward as much as possible.[2] It will be interesting to see whether on this occasion Balthus may deign to appear in person, allowing for the surmise that aristocrat and artist have always had in common a secret hankering for the inelegant commotion of popular apotheosis. In the meantime, the count remains remote in Switzerland, receiving select visitors with courtly decorum. His status as a living legend has recently received the public sanction of his elder son, Stanislas, who has gone the count several times better by calling himself the Prince de Rola, and who composed the preface for a glossy volume of reproductions. Having nothing original or illuminating to say about his father's work, the arrogant offspring saw fit to introduce his lack of insight by recalling the paternal admonition that "Balthus is a painter of whom *nothing is known.*" If the artist really expects us to accept that description, then he seems to be demanding that we submit, as he has, to the self-deluding supremacy of the make-believe. Illusion is essential to art, of course. The very concept of beauty deals in criteria elusive and changeful. But the heart of the matter, as Keats saw, lies in individual dedication to truth.

An artist who stands haughtily aloof from his own time, basing his whole aesthetic posture upon that stance, is exposing himself to the danger that the future may pass him by. The history of art is pitiless, more pitiless even than the rest of history, because the kind of immortality it offers is the truest kind, and the offer is for all or for nothing. Great creators have usually looked into the future for the prospect of great fulfillment, seldom into the past, for the past proposes mainly the ground of criteria which are, after all, fruitless to cultivate, having been harvested already, and duplication, where possible, is by definition pointless. Looking to the future, though, is a daunting business, which does not sit well with an appetite for emulation, anachronistic honors, and titles. The most, and least, an artist can do for posterity is to acknowledge that his personal demise will differ in no way from that of a billion other men, and prove that he has been able to take great creative account of that grim, miraculous fact. If he can do that, then maybe his creations will

2 "Balthus" will be shown at the Centre National d'Art et Culture Georges Pompidou in Paris from November 4, 1983 to January 23, 1984, and at the Metropolitan Museum of Art from February 29, 1984 to May 13.

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live up to the one dream which appears to set man apart from other creatures on earth, and by doing so provide his fellow men with a few noble instants of surcease from the contemplation of their own nonentity. This, perhaps, is too somber and idealistic a view of the artist's option, in which case it would leave ample room for the possibility that the future may do well by a bid for its attention put forward by one who shows little confidence in its discrimination. Admirers of Balthus will hope so, and it is true that their hopes are not based on bluff. The nobleman may have been bogus, though indispensable, but the artist was real. His reality was even greater than his identity, and he was bound to an involvement with it so passionate that the outcome went beyond the personal. Greatness always starts that way. How far it can go, time, and death, will tell.

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The sufferings of Heinrich von Kleist

by Arthur A. Cohen

Writing on March 22, 1801, to his fiancée, Wilhemine von Zenge, Heinrich von Kleist described in painstaking detail the collapse of his vision of the universe. He had believed until then (he was twenty-four at the time) that human beings were capable of building a secure and virtuous life by acquiring knowledge that reflected the coherence of reality and perception, of self and world. The previous three years, following his release from the army, Kleist had occupied himself with the study of mathematics, physics, and philosophy. He had disdained a career of easy preferment in the military for the arduous pursuit of philosophic and moral self-understanding, training himself to think clearly and act virtuously. In this undertaking he was behaving as an exemplary offspring of his class and station.

Born on October 18, 1777, into a noble family that had produced generations of Prussian generals, Kleist was expected either to serve in the army or to work for the Prussian state. He tried the first, but after six years, during which time he rose from corporal to second lieutenant in the cavalry, he determined to abandon the boredom and tyranny of army life. Returning from the military, Kleist formulated the first of his many life plans, describing to an old teacher and then to his sister, Ulrike, his optimistic quest for moral excellence and the achievement of happiness. He decided to eschew the family's call to practicality, to earning a livelihood, establishing his presence at the Prussian court, and winning his way by social manipulation and slavish conformity to the requirements of his class. Kleist wanted instead to be free to grow in accordance with his own notions of sovereign reason and moral perfection.

Although rebellious against his provincial family, the young Kleist was in all other respects a predictable child of the Enlightenment, enamored of Rousseau's image of natural harmony and of solidly German paragons of humanistic reason. It is improbable that the Kleist we have come to know should have emerged from this genial environment, protected as he was by modest wealth, property, title, and access to the guardians of Prussia; he might easily have grown to be very much like Tolstoy's Pierre, slightly bumbling, full of goodwill and moral self-scrutiny, belabored by bouts of guilt and ennui, troubled by injustice and inequality, but capable finally—at the end—of making a bearable peace or, at the very least, of negotiating a lasting truce between his own ambition for truth and the wretched deceits that were commonplace around him.

As it happened, Kleist was not able to bring off such a halcyon accommodation. During his travels in 1801, he came upon the writings of Immanuel Kant. It is not certain whether he read *The Critique of Pure Reason* or *The Critique of Judgment,* or whether indeed he read an account of Kant's doctrine in an unidentified second-

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ary source.[1] In any event, misunderstanding Kant had a devastating effect upon him. Kleist had wanted to believe that truth could be quantified, built up as packets of certainty that could be carried to his death and beyond into an afterlife where terrestrial truths would be purified and enlarged. Instead, as he reported to Wilhelmine after reading Kant, "we can never be certain that what we call Truth is really Truth, or whether it does not merely appear so to us. If the latter, then the Truth that we acquire here is *not* Truth after our death, and it is all a vain striving for a possession that may never follow us into the grave."

The conviction that a solid, linked, and impermeable universe had been destroyed by what he took to be Kant's persuasive skepticism produced in Kleist another absolute as treacherously negative as the one he despaired of securing had been treacherously positive: "My one, my highest goal has sunk from sight, and I have no other." The "I have no other"—no reserves, no options—compelled Kleist to conclude "that Truth is nowhere to be known on earth." He scuttered like a rat in a sealed maze: "I have not touched another book. I have paced idly in my room, I have sat by the open window, I have run from the house, an inner unrest at last drove me to taverns and coffee houses, I have gone to plays and concerts for distraction and to find some relief I have even committed a folly." (The folly in this instance has been understood to allude to Kleist's first detailed planning of suicide.)

It had all become "stale, flat, and unprofitable." Kleist had left Frankfurt an der Oder, his birthplace and the home of his family and fiancée, to travel in search of self-understanding, but his pursuit of *Bildung* (formation of character) had brought him to the abyss. Had it turned out otherwise, he might have returned to his conventionally pretty and mindless young fiancée, but instead, as his letters of late spring 1801 make clear, it had become necessary for him to prolong his absence, to try Paris in the midst of Napoleon's consulship following the Terror. Wilhelmine became ever more distant, an almost abstract recipient of letters, her person evoked by increasingly formulaic and static images that betray Kleist's growing indifference to her as the real goal of his longing for "wife, my own house and *freedom.*"

It was on the way to Paris in 1801 that Kleist discovered an alternative to the life he had forsworn. In Dresden, he encountered Catholicism and art. Although possessing a strong Protestant contempt for ritual and dogma, Kleist found himself moved by the visual excess of the Church, its appeal to spectacle as a simulacrum of the holy Trinity. ("Ah, a single drop of forgetfulness and I would embrace Catholicism with passion.") "Nothing could have led me with such total forgetfulness from the melancholy fields of learned abstractions as has the art collected in this city . . . . Such things have no need of the intellect to be enjoyed, and work only on the heart and the senses."

After Dresden, Paris was annoying. The French seemed frivolous, ceaselessly chattering the inconsequential. Although the Louvre was to reinforce his experience of Dresden's art, Paris was on the whole unbearable. Kleist was obviously no cosmopolitan and he was by then even less a young bourgeois than his origins might have dictated. He decided to take himself out of the world of competitive sociality and to make a place in nature where beauty could be contemplated and the interior riot of passions could be re-patterned as art. Kleist determined to become a poet (*Dichter*), which meant to him a craftsman in images rather than a laborer in ideas. If he could wangle the funds, he would be a farmer as well. Amid nature's solitude, Kleist dreamed he would install his wife, till the soil, and make himself famous.

1 In his critical essay accompanying the Rowohlt selection of Kleist's prose, Curt Grützmacher discusses the complexity of what is called Kleist's "Kant crisis." Ernst Cassirer, in his essay on the matter, suggested that Kleist might have read J. G. Fichte's just published study *Die Bestimmung des Menschen* (1800).

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In one of the earliest formulations of his life plan, Kleist had affirmed that a "single good deed" should be among the goals of life. A good deed was hardly at the core of his ambition, but a great one surely was. Indeed, the virtuous assumption of his youthful planning was a screen to the more desperate and arrogant project which began to emerge during his Paris days in the summer of 1801. Still believing in the infinite prospects of youth and its insatiable ambition, Kleist formulated the demand for greatness. "Nothing is settled and all things are possible." It is a game of chance, where fate proffers the lots but destiny elects one. Why should not that one "assure greatness"?

In 1802 Kleist was able to leave Germany and settle on a deserted island near Lake Thun in Switzerland. Although he was filled with self-criticism for refusing to accommodate himself to the requirements of a young Prussian aristocrat and therefore thought himself a failure in the world's terms, he nonetheless believed himself capable of producing a stunning success that would render his ordinary failures inconsequential. Writing from his island isolation, Kleist affirmed his willingness to die if he could only produce "a child, a beautiful piece of writing, and a great deed." Wife and home passed from his mind; only acts of making remained. Each in its own way was hazardous for a man who was a virgin (and apparently remained one), who had never written anything but private letters, and who still considered virtue so exalted and remote as to be almost inaccessible to mortals. Nonetheless, Kleist's final letter to Wilhelmine, written on May 20, 1802, is decisive. Wilhelmine had refused to play a part in his pastoral romance, his family had closed off all financial support, and only faithful Ulrike—who would herself finally betray him—was willing to underwrite this first and last year of peace in her brother's life.

Kleist's formulation of his intentions is, as always, ultimate and total. Either fame or death. "Either I return to my Fatherland a famous man, or not at all. This remains as decided once and for all as the very nature of my being . . . . [I]t matters not whether in pleasure or displeasure, I have committed myself to writing." At the conclusion of the letter, having informed Wilhelmine that he has no further wish to hear from her, he writes: "I have no other wish than very soon to die." There is no determination here to prefer exile to humiliation, to prefer the atmosphere where free work is unhampered to the obloquy of an acceptable life. Kleist, desperate pre-modern though he was, knew no language of exile. Exile was wrought from within, in the "inner immigration" of which his countrymen were to speak more than a century later under very different conditions of tyranny. And of all permanent exiles, the only one that made sense to Kleist was death.

At each of the many moments in Kleist's life when the scuttering rat found no exit among the living, the one exit that remained open for him was voluntary death. Kleist could pursue death, hymning it as the single freedom available to the tormented, because among all the absolutes thrust upon him by the world, death seemed the least terrifying. Death was never represented by him as the annihilating end, emplaced like a disgusting finality to a life of enterprise and striving. It was always a viable and considered alternative—not simply a way out of a deceitful human society but a way into a seraphic existence, where he imagined wings would indeed be worn, the best of one's friends would be reassembled in tranquility, and conversation would be superb, where the fields of Elysium would glitter with sunlight and flowers. No wonder that in his early adolescence Kleist signed a suicide pact with his cousin, Carl Otto von Pannwitz (who in fact did—much later—commit suicide) and that he renewed the offer to join in suicide with virtually every other significant person—male or female—in his life. The sole exception was the girl whom he had betrothed. He evidently regarded her as too simple and commonplace to take part in such a grand alliance against ordinary living and ordinary dying.

It is all too easy to convict Kleist of self-

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destructive mania, to chart the lines of exaltation and despair that marked his indubitably manic-depressive pathology, to do as did the medical autopsists when they examined his brain following his suicide and described its owner as possessed of "a temperament *sanguino cholericus* in the first degree" who "must certainly have suffered from fits of extreme depression." The autopsists added that "a general excess of religious enthusiasm might reasonably be deduced in the case of the male deceased, von Kleist." Kleist was in fact not conventionally religious, but he had fabricated for himself "a personal religion" in which suicide was a central ritual of expiation meticulously designed to convert failed life into excellence and its violent means into an object of divine approbation. Kleist craved approval with an innocence that would be laughable were its consequences not so horrendous. It is no wonder that at the end, having conspired against himself and his own ambition with complete success, Kleist should have been left with only an infantile divinity to approve his self-destruction.

The inquest concluded that at four o'clock in the afternoon on November 11, 1811, having ordered coffee and rum, as well as writing implements, to be brought along with a table and chairs to the heather-covered knoll that rises above the Kleiner Wannsee some three miles from Berlin on the road to Potsdam, Heinrich von Kleist murdered Henriette Vogel and then, with another pistol, blew his brains out. As Joachim Maass asserts in his recent biography of Kleist,[2] it is not incorrect to regard this suicide as Kleist's first resounding success. The event was noted in the press throughout Germany, Austria, France, even England. Kleist had achieved fame.

During the scant decade between Kleist's decision to write and his death, he produced the whole body of his work: some seven plays (and the notorious fragment of his tragedy *Robert Guiscard*, which Christoph Martin Wieland, the German romantic, had hailed, when passages were read to him by Kleist, as demonstrating "that nothing is impossible for the genius of the sacred Muse that inspires you"),[3] eight novellas and tales, a body of stunning philosophic journalism and anecdotes (itself a German romantic genre), a score of ordinary, principally patriotic, poems, and a steady stream of totally candid and painful letters. These were to form the corpus on which Kleist staked his claim for immortality. As the years passed, bringing with them few minor successes and even fewer rewards, Kleist's stake became smaller while the wager remained no less than total. Everything was risked, each time. It was a calculus fated to catastrophe from the very beginning.

An essential ingredient of Kleist's aesthetic enterprise—his determination to remain an exile to death if he failed to produce an acknowledged masterpiece—was his refusal of German classicism, represented preeminently by Goethe (then in his prime, his *Werther* and *Torquato Tasso* already behind him) and by Friedrich Schiller, whose heroic dramas dominated the theatrical literature. The basis of Kleist's decision to write for the stage, as motivated as it assuredly was by the

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2 *Kleist: A Biography*, by Joachim Maass, translated from the German by Ralph Manheim; Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 313 pages, $22.50. Maass's biography, although the first to be published in the English language, is by no means the best. It covers the life and works but without critical perspective and orientation. Moreover, it passes over such significant biographical dilemmas as Kleist's famous Würzburg visit, which is regarded by many scholars as having been the occasion for a precarious operation for a penile disorder, his "Kant crisis," and his self-destruction, which, although documented, is hardly interpreted. Beyond these lapses of exegesis, the writing is either orotund or flat, philistine judgments abound, and the usually superb translator, Ralph Manheim, has failed to smooth out the wrinkles in Maass's popular prose.

3 Four of Kleist's plays have recently been published by The German Library. They are edited by Walter Hinderer and include a foreword by E.L. Doctorow: *Plays*; Continuum Publishing Company, 341 pages, $17.50.

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wish to commandeer a large public and a considerable income, lay in his not quite unconscious competition with the established classicists of German literature. Wieland had fired that ambition when he reaffirmed his conviction that Kleist's talent would "fill the wide gap in our dramatic literature which, at least in my opinion, even Goethe and Schiller had failed to fill." But at the time of offering his assessment, only one play of Kleist's had been completed and published, his first play had been scrapped, *The Broken Jug* (a comedy which today stands in German literature alongside Lessing's *Minna von Barnhelm*) was incomplete, and *Robert Guiscard,* which tracks the fortunes of a Norman crusader stalled before Constantinople, resisted completion. Only the virtually unplayable *The Schroffenstein Family* (1802) was finished and published (in Switzerland) at the time Kleist received Wieland's enthusiasm. Creaky and mannered in its intricate devices though it was, *The Schroffenstein Family* already manifested the strength that was to invest all of Kleist's work with its nervous energy—the pressing to the foreground of the deepest and hitherto inscrutable complexities of private psychology. Although Georg Lukacs, in his essay "The Tragedy of Heinrich von Kleist," published in *Internationale Literatur* in Moscow in 1937, attacked Kleist's reckless (and to his view, reactionary and decadent) privatization of the public conscience that had dominated German classical drama, clearly for Kleist the values that ordered the public weal, shored up consensual morality, and supported the *status quo ante* were simply untrue and, for all their popularity, immoral. Kleist turned his back on the morally acceptable and made the domain of decision and will private: "locked from the inside," as the old retainer in *Schroffenstein* says when he comments on the fate of the unhappy lovers murdered in a dynastic feud.[4]

The Schroffenstein Family, although hailed by some readers and admired by some viewers at its only performance in Graz, was generally ignored. In a fit of despair, Kleist destroyed the manuscript of *Robert Guiscard,* only a fragment of which was later reconstructed by him. It had resisted too long and although Kleist averred that he had spent five hundred hours trying to write it, his imagination remained stubbornly unyielding. Clearly Wieland had misjudged his young friend. Hoping to cheer and inspirit him by his praise of Kleist's abilities, Wieland had only succeeded in blocking him.

Kleist slowly began to unravel. Between 1803 when he returned to Germany from Switzerland and received the encomia of the old romantic, and 1807, when he settled in Dresden, Kleist's commitment to writing was severely tested. The effort to complete *Robert Guiscard,* "to add one more to our family's laurel wreaths," had failed. And he concluded this letter: "I cannot go on." Fame eluded him; *consolatione mortis* beckoned once more. It was several months later, in Paris, that Kleist tore up the manuscript and burned it. Although he then persistently invited his traveling companion to join him in suicide, the usually passive Ernst von Pfuel, angered by Kleist's importunings, lost his temper and stormed out. When he returned Kleist had disappeared. Kleist then made a determined effort to join Napoleon's army, not out of sympathy with Napoleon, for whom he had otherwise wholehearted contempt, but out of a desire for a hero's death. "Heaven denies me fame, the greatest of this earth's treasures; like a stubborn child I am rejecting all the others it has to offer me . . . hurling myself to my death . . . . I shall die a beautiful death in battle . . . . I rejoice at the prospect of an infinitely glorious grave." Kleist was at last apprehended and with mighty intercessions returned to Potsdam. At a family council in Frankfurt an der Oder, he was promised a steady income if he would enter government service and renounce his literary vocation. Already broken, he capitulated. After nine months of social maneuvering in Berlin, where he consolidated his position in the reigning salons

4 I am indebted to the young German writer Gunnar Kaldewey for pointing out this passage to me as a touchstone of Kleist's sensibility.

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of the day (including that of Rahel Levin, soon to be the wife of Varnhagen von Ense[5]), Kleist enrolled in a training program for the Prussian bureaucracy, taking himself to Königsberg to learn economics and political theory.

It was all, however, buying time. In Königsberg, reading Molière's *Amphitryon* and Montaigne's essay on drunkenness, Kleist conceived of his own *Amphitryon* and his exquisite novella *The Marquise of O.*[6] Exposure to the *Märkische Chronik* of Peter Hafftiz, where the career of Michael Kohlhaas is factually detailed, set Kleist's own tale of implacable warfare against injustice into motion. And his reading in classical mythology defined the ground of his soaring, if barbaric, gigantomachy *Penthesilea.*

It could not be helped. Although literature no longer promised him fame, Kleist spoke of it as though it were a disease that could never be shaken. He had relapsed, literally, into prose. He was tormented by insomnia, digestive difficulties, palpitations, eye strain, headaches—the whole equipment of the confirmed neurasthenic who knows that he suffers, as Kleist said, "from insuperable heart sickness." There was no choice but to abandon again the acceptable for the improbable. Kleist petitioned to leave government service. After five months in a French prison, where he had been sent on suspicion of being a spy, he returned to Dresden, the only society in which he had experienced any health and exuberance.

Amphitryon was completed and published in 1807, while Kleist still languished in prison. That tragicomedy, laden with the mistaken identities in which Kleist delighted, is typical in its excavation from the inside. Muddles of identity abound, but they arise from the necessities that the gods feel to mask their absolute dominion in the guise of human passions and from the impotencies that mortal lovers experience when they are pitted against divine power. Goethe didn't like the play, but he thought the playwright promising and undertook to produce *The Broken Jug* in Weimar, where he served as artistic director of the local theater. Moreover, the Dresden interlude found Kleist manically productive, completing *Penthesilea,* which centered on the love-death combat of the Queen of the Amazons with Achilles, and seeing to the publication of *The Broken Jug, The Marquise of O.,* his terrifying story *The Earthquake in Chile,* as well as his drama of maidenly mystification *Käthchen of Heilbronn.* He could write confidently to his disapproving sister that his life was "so full of promise . . . that I hardly know where to begin and end."

As surely as his life was full of promise, however, its end was already predictable. In his introduction to *An Abyss Deep Enough,* a collection of Kleist's letters published recently,[7] Philip B. Miller correctly emphasizes the "stain on reputation that Goethe must bear for his disdainful treatment of poor, petitioning Kleist." As much as Kleist wished to surpass Goethe ("I'll tear the wreath from his brow"), he had a desperate need to win his approval. Progress in the literary culture of Germany could only be

5 See Hannah Arendt's superb account of the Berlin salons in her biography, *Rahel von Varnhagen.*

6 In 1960, Criterion Books published the complete stories of Kleist in *The Marquise of O. and Other Stories.* Splendidly translated and subtly introduced by Martin Greenberg, this edition also carried a translation of the revised version of Thomas Mann's essay on Kleist of 1954. Although long out of print, it should certainly be reissued.

7 *An Abyss Deep Enough: Letters of Heinrich von Kleist* (including a selection of essays and anecdotes), edited, translated, and introduced by Philip B. Miller; E. P. Dutton, 297 pages, $16.95. Miller's carefully selected and translated anthology of Kleist's correspondence, essays, and anecdotes, serves, almost better than Maass's biography, to orient the reader to the psychology and metaphor of Kleist. Although marred by the introduction of modern syntactical conventions and paragraphing (where Kleist is all full-blown and breathless), Miller's translations are graceful and passionate, his annotation of the letters provides a biography in miniature, and his interpretations are judicious and unflinching.

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made by gaining sponsored entrance into its tight and internecine society, and Goethe alone could arbitrate the warfare of snobbism and provinciality. Kleist sent Goethe his *Penthesilea* "on the knees of my heart," believing that if Goethe liked *The Broken Jug* he would endorse his tragedy and even deign to contribute to the literary almanac, *Phoebus,* which Kleist and his Dresden associates (once more, with sister Ulrike subscribing his share) were just launching.

Goethe, whose classicism was rooted in a Christianized rendition of the Greek worldview, could not bear the violence of Kleist's play. Whereas Kleist was pressing toward a more faithful rendering of the hitherto unplumbed depths of human emotion—its capacity for contradiction and revenge, its endless quest for reconciliations that lift up and transform the most base and bloodthirsty capacities of the heart—Goethe was wedded to his own vision of a serene, majestic, transcendent classical harmony. Nothing could be more alienating than Kleist's *Penthesilea.* Kleist was creating a tableau of language that was as unprecedented in its bloody lust as it was extreme in its stylization. Here, as elsewhere, despising romantic effusion and classical order, Kleist nonetheless employed the conventions of both to produce an entirely new reading of the classical mythology upon which much German literature drew.

Goethe was as implacable with Kleist as he was with Hölderlin and Caspar David Friedrich. (Lamentably, Goethe had the weakness of admiring second-raters while passing over anyone who threatened his own view of himself or the world he endorsed.) Not content, however, with rejecting *Penthesilea,* Goethe went on to produce a bowdlerized version of *The Broken Jug,* virtually destroying that excellently witty and moderately ribald exposure of a peculating provincial judge who, caught in his own sexual escapades, undertakes to shift blame onto an innocent and fails. Goethe's production was a disaster; however not Goethe, but Kleist, was held to blame.

Kleist could not deal with Goethe's disdain, much less with what he took to be his betrayal. Resorting to a petty device, Kleist circulated two scurrilous epigrams designed to reveal Goethe's own philistinism and only succeeded, as one might suppose, in alienating the rest of his public, who could bear hypocrisy more readily than the abuse of its cultural god. Moreover, Kleist bruited it about—his Prussian honor offended—that he wanted to challenge Goethe to a duel. It never came about, but the whole incident was to mark the beginning of a virtual litany of condemnation and outrage from Goethe toward the younger man and his literary presumption. Goethe was later to say, after Kleist's suicide, that Kleist had filled him with "horror and revulsion, as if a body which nature had intended to be beautiful were afflicted with an incurable disease." Goethe went on to speak of "something barbaric, misshapen" about Kleist; it was as if Kleist were "a Nordic phantom of acrimony and hypochondria." In fact, the core of Goethe's rage was less Kleist's assault on his *amour-propre* than the recognition that, as Goethe said of *Michael Kohlhaas,* it took a "great spirit of contradiction to generalize on a single instance with such consistent and radical hypochondria." Goethe had framed a canonic principle that Kleist unswervingly denied: "there are unbeautiful, terrifying things in nature, with which literature, however skillfully it may treat them, ought neither to concern nor to reconcile itself." For Kleist the true and revealing subjects of literature were invariably unbeautiful.

Goethe had read Kleist correctly and disapproved. Precisely the point! All the stories, even those bonded to unembellished themes of Gothic horror, have no intention of merely entertaining. They were are about terrains of consciousness that no other writer among his contemporaries (setting aside the indubitable morbidity of Goethe's own *Werther*) could even acknowledge existed. Although Kleist moved the *scenum* to distant continents and earlier times, employing unfamiliar devices of spookdom and necromancy, clanking armor and chivalric codes, swoonings, rapes, and murders abundant,

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he was always intent upon an inversion of sensibility, on externalizing the riot of passions that he discerned within himself and, by extension, within everyone. He used himself continuously as his test case and what he located in his own manic-depressive hallucinations he found abundant tale and incident to make universal as art.

Unrecognized by his contemporaries, Kleist has come to be hailed as a messenger of modernity, presumably for his uncannily prescient talent for bringing out of his own depths a sense of the disorder and estrangement of consciousness, for recognizing in his own psyche the possibilities of malevolence and perfection, of depraved sensuality and pitiable isolation, shared by everyone. It is hardly remarkable that Nietzsche and later Kafka would find Kleist their spiritual kinsman. Nietzsche admired his willingness to live on the edge of the real, where capitulating to conventional reality is a more severe bankruptcy than striving for another reality and falling to one's death. Kafka discerned the Kleistean similitudes to his own embarrassing impotencies and abysmal social ineptitude, his incapacity for intimacy and psychic isolation. But for both Nietzsche and Kafka (and for many others as well), it is Kleist's work, not his life, that remains preeminent.

It seems to me mistaken to ransack the premoderns for signs of modernism, as though our age requires for confirmation of its excellence or misery the proof that its spirit was in the air nearly two centuries ago. What good does it do either ourselves or the reputation of Kleist to make of him our ancestor? If he was a forebear, it was surely not a service to us or our instruction, since he had not really begun to be read and admired (as a putative hero of modernism) until long after the disarray of the modern world had begun to be annotated. If Friedrich Gundolf in 1922 placed Kleist alongside Stendhal, Flaubert, Baudelaire, Mallarmé, Buechner, Hebbel, and Nietzsche, he was only congratulating the age of which he was a gravific exponent. By the war years and beyond, Kleist would be settled into the battles of modernist assessment, trounced by Lukacs as a "radical nihilist," and admired by Thomas Mann "as one of the greatest, boldest, and most ambitious poets Germany has produced."

The core of Kleist's modernity—the quality singled out by virtually every contemporary writer on Kleist—is his utter aloneness. Surely, however, this indubitable mark of his life is less a signature of modernism than a register of the extremity of his creative achievement. Given the documentation of his pathology, the procedure of self-isolation that Kleist pursued with almost fanatic specialization was a portion of his pathology which would have functioned even if Kleist had been the maker of conventional tear-jerkers and farce. The Kleist who paid attention to himself, who took a hard look at his own catastrophe and charted its development, who dared to write in a letter twelve days before his suicide that "my soul is so sore, if I so much as poke my nose out of the window, the light of day, I might almost say, is painful on it" is more than isolated and alone.

Kleist had, above all, made the written word a *factum brutum*. Words were never signs or symbols of a generalized condition or civilizational malaise. He broke familiar molds, as Lessing, Goethe, and Schiller had broken them, as Hölderlin, Novalis, Nietzsche, and Kafka would come to break them. He was doing nothing special other than being a genius of awareness. The fact that the pedestrian writers of his day could confect with ruffs and frills and satisfy the conventional expectations of the literate should not be interpreted as proof that Kleist anticipates our age. At its best, modernism is as much despised and misunderstood in our time and practiced by as few as it was in Kleist's day. Goethe towered over all because he wrought a total universe that was finally easy to take—even in its extreme and encompassing formulation in *Faust*—precisely because the elevation and grandeur of its values were held dear by every cultural aspirant. It could be admirable

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while still remaining the portion of the middle class. Kleist, however, had no such synthetic genius. Neither did he enjoy the early admiration which, with sponsorship and sinecure, would have freed him to tear down the old world with the whole-hearted support and misunderstanding of his contemporaries. Besides, Kleist would have destroyed himself as surely and exquisitely even if he had been as celebrated as Goethe.

One is tempted then to forget the horrific details of Kleist's life—the dubious triumph of his suicide—and concentrate on the work, among which the most emblematic, profound, painfully mortal, and sad is the essay "On the Puppet Theater," which he printed in his ill-fated Berlin newspaper, *Die Abendblätter,* less than a year before his death. It was anticipated by a brief note he had written for his paper shortly before, where he inverted the Enlightenment dream of endless progress and described the course of the world as one of irreversible decline. The decline, he wrote, began with the living heroes of antiquity and devolved through the poetry that celebrates them to the codification of the rules of such poetry and the philosophy that abstracts their principles after the poetry has ceased, ending thereafter in simple badness. Not up from savagery to perfection, but down from spontaneity to frozen evil. Obviously Kleist foreshortened for the sake of brevity, for he could have inserted much between the rise of philosophy and the coming of the evil age, but he took it for granted that those few who got the point would fill in the blanks. Pessimism was the point. Nothing further could be expected of civilization. If there was hope it would be only with those intrepid voyagers of the spirit who would not be afraid, as he asserts in "On the Puppet Theater," to travel the long way around and enter paradise from the back. The devolution from un-self-conscious grace into the barren narcissism of civilization, from the innocence of the first paradise to the return of innocence in the second, is a passage through infinity and forgetfulness, a retracing of the whole of human history in order that we forget our disenchantment, guile, self-deception—all conditions born of reflection and consciousness. We must, Kleist concludes, eat of the tree of knowledge a second time in order to fall back once again into the grace of innocence. "On the Puppet Theater" was Kleist's last argument for truth and justice. In his own day, the essay was hardly remarked.

The acts of Kleist's last days were all gestures of summation and leavetaking. He sent the fair copy of his masterpiece *The Prince of Homburg* to his cousin, Marie von Kleist, as a testamentary gift. Like *Michael Kohlhaas, The Prince of Homburg* diagrams the paradoxicality of human justice. Ironically, it explores the crisis of conscience of a victorious cavalry commander condemned to death for disobeying orders although by doing so he won a great victory. At its conclusion, the young Prince, in a speech before his execution, speaks much as Kleist would write before his suicide several weeks later: "O immortality, you're mine./Your light, intenser than a thousand suns,/Pierces the bindings of these earthly eyes." Kleist then destroyed all his manuscripts, tidied his room, prepared a trunk that contained his few keepsakes and letters to be delivered after his death, and departed with Henriette Vogel to keep the rendezvous he had been planning since his youth.

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Willa Cather: listing toward Lesbos

by Joseph Epstein

Since her death, Willa Cather seems to have been appointed an honorary lesbian. The honor may seem a dubious one, from several points of view, and the lesbianism is itself by no means as free from doubt as such things ought to be. Yet literary criticism and biography, unshackled by cheap doubt, march on. In a book by Jane Rule entitled *Lesbian Images,* Willa Cather's life supplies a chapter. In a piece entitled "Nocturnal Turnings" in his book *Music for Chameleons,* Truman Capote describes encountering Willa Cather in 1942 at the New York Society Library on East Seventy-ninth Street: "Occasionally, I saw a woman there whose appearance rather mesmerized me—her eyes especially: blue, the pale brilliant cloudless blue of prairie skies. But even without this singular feature, her face was interesting—firm-jawed, handsome, a bit androgynous. Pepper-salt hair parted in the middle. Sixty-five, thereabouts. A lesbian? Well, yes." And now, in *Willa: The Life of Willa Cather,*[1] an admiring biography by Phyllis C. Robinson, it is regularly asserted and then assumed that Willa Cather was indeed a lesbian. Is all this so? I wonder. While wondering, I feel rather like Groucho Marx in that movie in which, standing next to Margaret Dumont, Groucho, pointing his thumb at Miss Dumont, says: "I have to fight for her reputation—she won't." Except that in Willa Cather's case it isn't a matter of won't but, being dead, can't.

The critic T. K. Whipple once referred to Willa Cather's literary career as a victory of mind over Nebraska. It is far from clear that this is a remark Willa Cather would have found amusing. Reading about her life in *Willa,* Phyllis Robinson's biography, the remark seems to have less in the way of accuracy than one might have thought. Willa Cather's family moved from the Shenandoah Valley in Virginia to the Nebraska Divide in 1883, when she was nine years old. The details of the life young Willa Cather found there are chronicled, imperishably and with a bleak grandeur, in such novels as *My Ántonia, O Pioneers!* and the early segments of *The Song of the Lark*[2]; they are rendered more personal in her story "Old Mrs. Harris." The Mrs. Harris of that title was closely modeled on Willa Cather's maternal grandmother. She lived with the Cathers, seeing after most of the domestic drudgery of caring for a large houseful of children, while Willa's mother, brought up in an atmosphere of Southern gentility, and her father, a genial but largely ineffectual man, attempted, in domestically crowded and less than financially opulent conditions, to make a life for themselves and their family in a fairly harsh environment.

After a year living out in the country on the Divide, the Cather family moved into

1 *Willa: The Life of Willa Cather,* by Phyllis C. Robinson; Doubleday, 321 pages, $17.95

2 *The Song of the Lark* has just been published in paperback by Houghton Mifflin.

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the nearby town of Red Cloud. Red Cloud then had 2,500 inhabitants; eight trains ran through it daily on the run between Chicago and Denver. It was a churchy town, with a predictable round of church suppers and ice-cream socials, and no absence of the mean-mindedness of small towns that propelled such writers as Sherwood Anderson and Sinclair Lewis to literary fury. But it also contained hidden treasure—not hidden, though, from as keen a child as the young Willa Cather. Among the Scandinavian and Bohemian and Hungarian farmers, Willa Cather came into contact with a circuit-riding German piano teacher of wide musical culture; a displaced Englishman working as a clerk in his brother's store who taught her and read Latin with her until she went off to college; the Wieners, a German Jewish couple who were neighbors and spoke French and gave her the run of their library; the two town doctors, who saw something special in her and sometimes took her with them on their rounds; and local businessmen, such as those she wrote about in her story "Two Friends," who seemed "strong and fine" at a time "when business was still a personal adventure." Then there were the theater and the occasional touring companies and musicians who stopped in Red Cloud, with their glitter, their intimations of a wider world, their purveyance of the excitement behind the thing called art.

"There seemed nothing to see; no fences, no creeks or trees, no hills or fields," says a character in *My Ántonia* about the country in which Willa Cather came of age. "There was nothing but land; not a country at all, but the material out of which countries are made." But between the wide spaces, amid the aridity and blankness, the life of Willa Cather, the artist-to-be, took root, and the roots sank deep. It provokes the question: Of what are artists made? It is another of those questions without an adequate answer. Although neither crude nor philistine, the Cather home was not especially fertile soil for an artist to grow in; certainly none of Willa Cather's brothers or sisters turned to art for solace and sustenance. Little in the surrounding atmosphere encouraged devotion to art. Yet by a curious concatenation of mystery and accident, Willa Cather became a convert, quite young, to the religion of art. As she herself was to write, in the preface to the second edition of *The Song of the Lark,* of Thea Kronborg, the heroine of that novel and a character compounded of the opera singer Olive Fremstad and herself: "She seemed wholly at the mercy of accident; but to persons of her vitality and honesty, fortunate accidents always happen."

Willa Cather matriculated at the University of Nebraska in Lincoln as a preparatory student in 1890. She was not yet seventeen, but had already attained that squarish matronly masculine figure later made famous through photographs of her by Edward Steichen. She had thought earlier to become a physician—the original career choice, as the guidance counselors nowadays say, of Gertrude Stein—but soon switched to classics. For an ostensibly provincial school, the University of Nebraska had a fairly impressive faculty. Many of Willa Cather's fellow students at the university were the children of immigrants; some would themselves go on to achieve distinction, among them John G. Pershing, as commander in chief of U.S. troops during World War I, Roscoe Pound, as dean of the Harvard Law School, and Alvin Johnson, as the economist who founded the graduate faculty of social and political science at the New York School for Social Research. Another acquaintance from Lincoln days was Dorothy Canfield—later Dorothy Canfield Fisher—who was the daughter of the president of the university and who later became a best-selling novelist and a member of the editorial board of the Book-of-the-Month Club.

By general consent, Willa Cather was the most brilliant student at the university. She went very much her own way, socially and intellectually; independence seemed to come to her naturally. She was, Mrs. Robinson notes in her biography, a girl one either admired or detested—someone, in any case, about whom it was difficult to feel neutral. She had strong opinions and took no dis-

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pleasure in broadcasting them, not even to the head of the English department, whose theories about literature, according to Mrs. Robinson, she "mercilessly ridiculed." She was never bohemian but she was highly idiosyncratic. She wore her hair short and shingled, her clothes were mannish, her voice deep. She had no love of ostentation yet neither did she seem to fear being conspicuous. Her best friend was Louise Pound, who later became a philologist. "No evidence exists," Mrs. Robinson writes, "that Willa ever had a serious boyfriend in college."

Yet Nebraska provided opportunities that a more culturally rich terrain might never have provided. At twenty, for example, Willa Cather wrote a regular column for the *Nebraska State Journal*. Two classroom exercises—an essay on Carlyle, another on *Hamlet*—were earlier published in the same newspaper. While going to school she wrote, for pay and print, about whatever it pleased her to write: vignettes, feature stories, reviews of books, art exhibits, opera performances, lectures. By the end of her junior year she was the *Journal*'s drama critic. Through following the arts as a young journalist she acquired, as she noted of the sad, star-struck young man in the story "Paul's Case," a strong whiff of "that indefinable air of achievement, that world-shine," that artists can have for the susceptible young. She had begun to acquire—to pick up another phrase from that same story—"what the churchmen call 'vocation.'" She worshipped art as if it were religion. In New York, in Boston, in Chicago, she would not have been permitted so close to the altar as she was able to get through journalism in Nebraska.

Mrs. Robinson's biography is very good on the subject of Willa Cather's youth, but as Willa Cather enters upon young womanhood the slender craft that is *Willa* begins to list toward the isle of Lesbos. Mrs. Robinson's is, I believe, the first biography of Willa Cather explicitly to announce Willa Cather to have been a lesbian. Mrs. Robinson takes no special pride in doing so. There is little of the iconoclast in her and nothing of the feminist militant. She admires her subject enormously. There is not a breath of malice in her book. I assume that Mrs. Robinson claims that Willa Cather was a lesbian because she believes it is so. She could, I suppose, have waffled on the point, though in our day waffling on such matters is impermissible. Yet is her case beyond arguing? On the question of whether Willa Cather was an active lesbian, Mrs. Robinson is in the unenviable position of having a great deal of evidence and no real proof.

In *Willa* there is much talk of Willa Cather's becoming "aware of her sexual nature," and of her coming "to terms with her own needs." Later, working as a journalist in Pittsburgh, when men asked her out "she wanted no emotional entanglements." As a young girl she sometimes signed herself "William." As a young woman she entered into an important friendship with Sarah Orne Jewett, who herself had a "Boston marriage" with Annie Fields, the widow of the publisher James T. Fields of the firm of Ticknor & Fields. Later Mrs. Robinson tells us that "there was a lusty, earthy side to Willa," and that "Willa undoubtedly needed sexual fulfillment as well as intellectual and social stimulation." And when she moved into an apartment in New York, in the Village, with Edith Lewis, with whom she lived for forty years, Mrs. Robinson writes: "Their life together was undoubtedly a marriage in every sense." (That's two undoubtedly's—beware trial by adverb.) But then she adds: "But Willa was too conscious of her ties to home and family, and too much a conservative Midwesterner herself, to live openly with Edith. And, in this regard, she never changed."

Or, to return to Nebraska, consider Willa Cather's behavior in connection with her dearest friend during her college years, Louise Pound, who was the sister of Roscoe Pound. Apparently everyone knew how much Willa cared for Louise and how important her friendship was to her. Yet in spite of this, Willa wrote a stinging profile in a school magazine of a "university graduate" who was unnamed but who was un-

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mistakably Roscoe Pound, in which she said, among other things, that the subject of her profile was a physical bully as a boy and now as a young man had turned into an intellectual bully. The Pound family was outraged; their house was placed off limits to Willa Cather; and as a consequence her friendship with Louise was forced asunder. Why did Willa Cather write this profile? Mrs. Robinson, not unintelligently, if somewhat arbitrarily, speculates:

> Yet something must have provoked her. What had Roscoe Pound done to cause her outburst? He must have hurt her in a way she could not forgive and one can only speculate about the things that may have passed between them. Had he found himself attracted to her and been rebuffed? Had he lashed out and bullied her for preferring his sister to himself? Perhaps he made fun of her attachment to Louise? Perhaps he did more than laugh at her. With his greater sophistication and knowledge of the world did he say ugly things about her to Louise? Perhaps he called the friendship unnatural and his sister's friend perverse. He may even have used the term "lesbian" to describe her. We do not know. We do know, however, that losing Louise caused Willa the most intense suffering she had ever known. In despair, she vowed to herself to be more cautious and less impetuous in her affections in the future.

However interesting and even comprehensive Mrs. Robinson's speculations, I wonder if she does not leave out one obvious possibility—and this is that Roscoe Pound might have been a truly disagreeable young man. (From other sources, notably the correspondence of Justice Holmes, we know he was a formidable and not entirely agreeable older man.) I wonder, too, if Mrs. Robinson doesn't here overlook the fact that writers, especially but not exclusively young writers, are a little crazy. They feel the power of a vigilante posse in their pens, and they are often to be seen riding off on them to do one or another kind of inky justice. Thus do writers put ex-, present, and future wives in their novels, in their poems and essays, attack friends and colleagues with whom they will have to continue living, and through their writing risk every kind of unpleasant rupture, personal and even legal. I think it interesting that Mrs. Robinson closes her paragraph of speculation by noting that Willa Cather vowed henceforth to be "more cautious and less impetuous in her affections" and not, as one might otherwise think if one were not dealing with a writer, in her actions.

Willa Cather's outspokenness evidently also cost her a chance at a job she wanted but was refused as a teacher at the University of Nebraska. And so, at the age of twenty-two, through connections made in Lincoln, she moved to Pittsburgh to take up the job of editor of a hodgepodge magazine called *The Home Monthly*. She published a good deal of her own early work in this magazine, including some short stories; and while working full time as an editor also sent a great deal of cultural correspondence—news of art on the eastern front—back to newspapers in Nebraska. A year or so after arriving in Pittsburgh, she left *The Home Monthly* to become the regular drama critic for a Pittsburgh daily, the *Leader,* on which she also worked as telegraph editor. At one point she spent a week in Manhattan filling in for the ill drama critic of the old *New York Sun*. A progress report on her own growing sophistication, subtlety, and general savvy can today be found in two volumes of Willa Cather's collected articles and reviews, *The World and the Parish* (University of Nebraska Press, 1970). Soon she would travel to Europe, work in Washington and Boston, live in New York. Sarah Orne Jewett once told her: "One must know the world so well before one can know the parish." These, then, were the years in which she was learning about the world in preparation for her incomparable understanding of Nebraska.

Although Willa Cather had published occasional stories and poems, her literary output had been preponderantly journalistic, but in Pittsburgh the artist began to win out over the journalist in her. (They were never very well matched to begin with.) She

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started to resent the time journalism took from her stories. She came more and more to admire Henry James, which is often a sign that the virus of art has taken unshakable hold. In 1901, now twenty-eight years old, she left her job on the Pittsburgh *Leader* to begin teaching high school. The attraction of teaching was the additional hours of freedom it gave her—hours that would be devoted to the cultivation of her own art.

But avast, over there, leeward, Lesbos spotted again. "Enter Isabelle," is Mrs. Robinson's chapter subheading that announces the beginning of the friendship between Willa Cather and Isabelle McClung. Miss McClung was a social figure in Pittsburgh's East End, a young patroness of the arts. Her father was Judge Samuel A. McClung, who presided over the trial of Alexander Berkman, the anarchist paramour of Emma Goldman's who was convicted of attempting to murder Henry C. Frick. The two women, who met in the dressing room of a socially acceptable actress, took to each other instantly. Isabelle McClung saw the quality in Willa Cather and saw, too, her potential as an artist, which she encouraged from the outset. She helped open doors for Willa Cather in Pittsburgh; later, it was at the home of the McClungs that Willa Cather would meet S. S. McClure, the publisher of *McClure's Magazine,* who offered her a job as an editor working on his magazine in New York.

But earlier, as part of Isabelle McClung's general taking up of Willa Cather, she invited her to live with her in the McClung household. Isabelle set aside a place for Willa to work on her stories and poems, which began to appear more and more frequently in the magazines of the day. The two women shared a bedroom; in 1902 they went off together on an extended tour of Europe. A dirty mind, it is said, never sleeps. Did Willa Cather and Isabelle McClung sleep—together? To put a blunt point on it: Were they lovers?

Mrs. Robinson believes so, she all but says so, but, again, she cannot prove it. What would constitute proof? No one is asking for eyewitnesses. (Peephole observation is still an unaccredited science.) Yet what about letters, such as the kind Eleanor Roosevelt wrote to Lorena Hickok: "I've been trying today to bring back your face—to remember just *how* you look . . . . Most closely I remember your eyes, with a kind of teasing smile in them, and the feeling of that soft spot just northeast of the corner of your mouth against my lips . . . ." But there are no such love letters between Willa Cather and Isabelle McClung; nor, so far as is known, between Willa Cather and any other woman. And this for a solid reason: Willa Cather deliberately destroyed her letters; and Edith Lewis, the woman she later lived with, destroyed her own letters to and from Willa Cather. Did they do so because they were sexually incriminating letters? Or did they do so because they felt that their letters were no one's business but their own? And, what is more, were they not entitled to do so?

At some point in most modern literary biographies one has to decide whose side one is on: the writer's or the biographer's. For the relationship between the two, writer and biographer, can be an adversary one, even if there is admiration on the biographer's side. More than once, for example, Phyllis Robinson tells us how much Willa Cather valued her privacy, how keen she was to obliterate the merely personal from her life. And yet it is precisely Mrs. Robinson's task as biographer to invade that privacy and to accentuate the personal. Sometimes, true enough, knowledge of the private and the personal can enlarge one's appreciation of a writer by demonstrating what horrors she had to live with, what obstacles she had to surmount on the way to becoming the writer she became. But that doesn't seem to have been the case with Willa Cather. She knew fairly early that she had it in her to be an artist, and she knew what it took to develop her art—nothing less than unremitting effort—and she seems to have arranged her life accordingly.

Meanwhile, in 1906, Willa Cather moved to New York to work as an editor on *Mc-*

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Clure's Magazine. She had by this time published a book of verse and a book of short stories. *McClure's Magazine* was about to pass its journalistic peak; Lincoln Steffens, Ida Tarbell, and other of the muckraking journalists who gave the magazine its special cachet, tired of what they viewed as the irresponsibility of Samuel McClure, were soon to leave to form a magazine of their own. Willa Cather's were the usual editorial chores: reading manuscripts, soliciting new material, working with authors on their articles, essays, stories. At one point, she was sent off to Boston to do research on a series of fifteen articles the magazine was planning, and which she would rewrite, on Mary Baker Eddy. Later she all but wrote S. S. McClure's autobiography. She was eventually made managing editor. Her job at *McClure's Magazine* put her into the great whirling world of New York.

Summers she returned to Nebraska to be with her family; often, on the way up or back, she stopped to stay with Isabelle McClung. One summer she visited her brother in Arizona, and the visit included her discovery of the cave homes of the cliff dwellers, an incident and locale that she would later use, transformed for fictional purposes, in at least three of her novels. The Southwest was in its own right a major discovery for her—"as much a landscape," as Mrs. Robinson well puts it, "of the mind and spirit as a physical landscape of rugged terrain and stunning natural features." Her interest in music had deepened, and her musical knowledge was said to be nearly on the professional level. She had begun to know the great figures in the arts of her time. She was beginning to be considered one of them; she was, in any case, among those invited to the famous seventy-fifth birthday party for William Dean Howells. Willa Cather was becoming very much a woman of the world.

In New York, Willa Cather moved into an apartment first on Washington Place then on Bank Street, with Edith Lewis. Edith Lewis, who worked for the advertising agency of J. Walter Thompson, had grown up in Lincoln, Nebraska; Willa Cather had first met her on a visit to Lincoln in 1903. The Bank Street apartment was flooded with light; its tenants indulged themselves by filling it as well with flowers. A woman came in to clean for them and also cooked simple but superior French meals. Willa Cather was not someone who lived happily alone. "She was happiest in a domestic setting and she wanted a place to live that would give her a feeling of home and family, that was neither transient nor lonely," writes Mrs. Robinson. "Her physical surroundings were important to her and so was the companionship of an attentive and loving friend."

Off the starboard bow—Lesbos sighted once more. Elizabeth Sergeant, in her *Willa Cather, A Memoir,* calls Edith Lewis a good first mate to Willa Cather. Phyllis Robinson, though, claims that, while Willa Cather never cared as passionately for Edith Lewis as she did for Isabelle McClung, "their life together was undoubtedly a marriage in every sense." But then the tendency in *Willa* is to cast a triangle of sorts—with Edith Lewis as the reliable homebody wife, Isabelle McClung as the unattainable love of Willa Cather's youth, with Willa Cather settling for the one yet yearning always for the other. And yet one wonders if this is an accurate account. It was not uncommon, for example, for Willa Cather to go off on holiday with Isabelle McClung while living with Edith Lewis, or indeed for the three women to be together. Mrs. Robinson may know something she isn't telling us here, but then if she does she would have done better to have told it.

Later, in 1915, Isabelle McClung married the Russian Jewish violinist Jan Hambourg. This, Phyllis Robinson informs her readers, came as a crushing blow to Willa Cather. Life would never be the same for her. The McClung home in Pittsburgh would never again shelter her. Isabelle and her husband invited Willa Cather to live with them—an odd thing for a woman to do with her former lesbian lover, one would think—but she refused. That Willa Cather was truly thrown by her friend Isabelle's marriage is not in question. What is in question is the

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reason why she was thrown. Mrs. Robinson posits that it was because Willa Cather had now irrevocably lost Isabelle McClung. But is it not quite as possible that she was thrown instead by the realization that she herself would never have a life such as her friend Isabelle's? For she, Willa Cather, had by now chosen marriage of another kind—marriage not to Edith Lewis, as Mrs. Robinson avers, but to art itself.

In 1915 Willa Cather was forty-two years old and had finally arrived as a literary artist. She had been publishing stories for years in such places as *The Century Magazine, Harper's* and *McClure's Magazine,* and in 1912 her first novel, *Alexander's Bridge,* appeared. But it was beginning in 1913, when she was forty, that the dam burst, and what rich creative waters flowed over it: *O Pioneers!* (1913), *The Song of the Lark,* (1915), *My Ántonia* (1918). Willa Cather had been patient, and now, in her forties, she was in full command of her powers. It is reminiscent of a remark that appears in *The Song of the Lark*: "Probably we don't get to the point of apprehending anything good until we're about forty. Then, in the light of what is going, and of what, God help us?, is coming, we arrive at understanding." She had left her job at *McClure's Magazine* and was working full time at her writing. Her life came increasingly to be organized around the composition of her novels and stories. Personal life receded in importance; it was what remained from time not spent at the desk. As the heroine of *The Song of the Lark* says, "Your work becomes your personal life. You are not much good until it does."

As for Willa Cather's own work, more than one critic has called her an elegiac novelist, which strikes me, as label-sticking goes, as not a bad job. In her mature novels Willa Cather laments the passing of the old order, but hers is lamentation crowned by celebration. As an artist, she had a love of magnanimity, of the fine and generous gesture. Better than any modern writer, she appreciated human dignity and understood what lay behind it. As she noted of the title character in the story "Old Mrs. Harris": "She had the kind of quiet, intensely quiet, dignity that comes from complete resignation to the chances of life." Willa Cather could—as no contemporary writer I can think of is able to do—make goodness utterly believable. She had gravity and in her work could achieve serenity. The largeness of her spirit lent her art a largeness of perspective. It also lent her prose the authority of poetry. Writing to Lewis Einstein, Justice Holmes noted: "I do like to see a poet tackle the facts that he has lived with no matter how uncompromising and make them blossom. I call Miss Cather a poet though she writes in prose."

Was there a figure in Willa Cather's carpet? In an interesting essay entitled "A Cave of One's Own," Leon Edel suggests that the central event in Willa Cather's life was her friend Isabelle McClung's marriage and the break it caused in the pattern in her own life. "Whether the relationship was actively or latently lesbian may not be particularly relevant here," Edel writes. "It is clear that a deep affection and love existed between the two." Edel sees this break—fairly persuasively, in my view—as the triggering cause behind the troubling though still brilliant novels of Willa Cather's middle period: *A Lost Lady* (1923), *The Professor's House* (1925), and *My Mortal Enemy* (1926). Professor Edel writes:

> We can see what brought on the depression of Willa Cather's middle years in the very midst of her success, and we can understand why she wrote that "the world broke in two in 1922 or thereabouts," for we know that to her search for inner security, going back to childhood, was added the deeper sense—hardly irrational from an adult point of view—that she had been cast off, that her beloved had turned from her to another. The reality was that Isabelle had moved forward in life and had married. Willa Cather had been unable to move forward; for her there had been a "divorce," and this represented a regression.

Yet the carpet in this case turns out to be

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not much more than a throw rug. For Willa Cather soon enough regained her balance, righted herself, and in 1927 wrote *Death Comes for the Archbishop*. This novel about the work of two missionary French priests in the American Southwest is filled with landscape and radiant with light and is as fine an account of friendship as any in literature. In *The Professor's House,* Professor St. Peter remarks to a student: "Art and religion (they are the same thing, in the end, of course) have given man the only happiness he has ever had." In *Death Comes for the Archbishop,* Willa Cather took religion and made art of it. Religious art, especially in our secular-minded century, may be the most difficult of all to achieve. The least touch of insincerity, as Henry Adams once noted, destroys the whole. The seamless beauty of *Death Comes for the Archbishop* is a measure of Willa Cather's mastery as an artist.

People who care about Willa Cather's work seem to care about it enormously. A large number of these people, in my experience, are not academics, but instead people who read for knowledge and pleasure and to help them understand life. These are, I believe, the readers Willa Cather cared most about having. Phyllis Robinson reports in her biography that Willa Cather preferred not to have her work read in schools, and refused to give permission to reprint her stories in anthologies that were assembled for classroom use. Although she is now sometimes taught in high schools and universities, she has by and large been spared—as Virginia Woolf has not—feminist martyrdom. And rightly so, for she wrote many things that rub too abrasively against the grain of contemporary feminist thought. "Everything that's alive has got to suffer," says Mrs. Harris, in her story "Old Mrs. Harris." Let the radical feminists put that on their placard and picket with it. Not very likely.

Nor will it do to sneak Willa Cather in the backdoor marked "Lesbian Writers." What, finally, can be the point of revealing that Willa Cather was a lesbian? What light does such a fact—if fact it be—throw on her work? Does Mrs. Robinson's biography, as Phyllis Rose, reviewing it in *The New York Times Book Review,* holds a new biography of Willa Cather ought, "address frankly and fully the complex subject of Cather's sexual identity and its relation to her work?" In Professor Rose's judgment, Mrs. Robinson's biography does not, and she is quite correct in this judgment. Professor Rose is representative of the new academic literary sensibility, feminist, Freudian, frank first and foremost. In the last paragraph of her review of Mrs. Robinson's *Willa,* she gives us a strong notion of how Willa Cather's achievement is likely to be viewed under the dispensation of the new literary sensibility:

> It is time to remove some of the pink and blue from our image of the apple-cheeked and prairie-blue-eyed Willa Cather. This writer we think of as Middle Western spent most of her life in the East. She chose to be a New Yorker. She was the hard-driving editor of a successful magazine and didn't start writing fiction full time until she was 40. Her literary ties were to Europe. The girl next door of American letters hated small-town America, rejected heterosexuality, and distrusted the family as the enemy of art. It is time to establish Willa Cather's complexity and her stature as a writer. *Willa* is not strong enough to do that.

The drift of Professor Rose's argument is clear enough from this paragraph. Professor Rose believes Willa Cather to have had an essentially masculine sensibility, deriving from her lesbianism. If Willa was a lesbian, it follows, moreover, that her works need to be reread—and freshly interpreted—in the light of her lesbianism. One can readily imagine these fresh interpretations. One covers one's ears in anticipation of fictional closet doors being banged open and shut by literary critics of Professor Rose's tendency. Professor Rose's criticism of Mrs. Robinson, after all, is that on the question of lesbianism she is too bland and too timid. In her review, Professor Rose says that "a biography of Willa Cather demands speculation, intuition, and a willingness to go out on a

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limb." But who is out on that limb? Willa Cather, I submit, and the meaning of her work and, ultimately, its reputation. And am I mistaken to imagine Professor Rose or a writer of her spirit out on that limb, too, but with a saw in hand?

I have attempted to cast doubt on the (as it seems to me) unproven assumption that Willa Cather was a lesbian, but even if it were proven to my satisfaction that she was a lesbian, this would have only the most negligible effect on my reading of her work or my high regard for her standing as a major American writer. In *Lesbian Images,* Jane Rule, who is apparently confident that Willa Cather was a lesbian, makes a point—and makes it neatly—that I wholly subscribe to when she writes: "What actually characterizes Willa Cather's mind is not a masculine sensibility at all but a capacity to transcend the conventions of what is masculine and what is feminine to see the more complex humanity of her characters."

The capacity to transcend, to rise, to fly above the common ground—is this not what art at its best always does? Yet so often the criticism of the day, especially in its academic setting, persistently attempts to pull it down. Perhaps it began when, in the early 1960s, black literary critics and writers claimed that only black writers could write about what was called the black experience. (Recall the attacks on William Styron for crossing jurisdictional lines in writing *The Confessions of Nat Turner.*) Then it was put forth that only Jews were qualified to write about Jews, women about women, and so on down the ethnic and sexual line. In this scheme, writers are reduced if not to their lowest then to their most obvious common denominator, the assumption being that one can only know—only write about—what one is. So if one is a homosexual one can only, either directly or in disguise, write about one's homosexuality. In the name of racial or ethnic or sexual pride, a considerable insult is paid to the literary imagination. Instead of transcendence, limitation is stressed. Willa Cather knew better. ("If one became an artist," she wrote, "one had to be born again.") More important, in her work she did better. To rediscover her now as a lesbian writer is the most efficient possible way to make a major novelist seem minor.

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Letter from London

Surreal life

by Herb Greer

The tragic culture-hero of the season if not the age must be James Gore-Graham, Esq. This hitherto obscure furniture designer from Hammersmith decided in late summer to take action on behalf of his eighteenth-century ideal of Art. The object of his attack was sitting on Thames's south bank beside the Royal Festival Hall, where it had been placed by a minor sculptor whose name in this matter is less important than his CND (Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament) sympathies. These had prompted him to pile up a great number of used car-tires more or less into the shape of a nuclear submarine. Whatever this may have portended for London-Moscow *Mir i Druzhba* (peace and friendship), to Gore-Graham it signified an aesthetic outrage and a disgusting blot on the public landscape. In the small hours of August 22 he walked up to the eyesore and poured a quantity of gasoline over one end of it. Knowing more Art than Chemistry, he did not realize that he had created a kind of bomb. When he struck a light, meaning to incinerate what he regarded as a pile of rubbish, it blew up in his face like napalm and burned ninety percent of his body. As he lay dying in the arms of a policeman who had rushed to the scene, the unwary idealist gasped, "I was a fool." For all that his death proved the truth of these last words, it may not have been quite useless. More vividly than any page of rhetoric it expressed the danger of rash gestures under the influence of ideology, and the unexpectedly lethal effect of theatrical demonstrations in the real world.

By a grisly coincidence the same points were being fictionally illustrated on a stage in Gore-Graham's part of London. The Lyric Hammersmith was offering Yuri Lyubimov's Moscow production of *Crime and Punishment* in an English version directed by Lyubimov himself. A few London critics were sniffy about the expressionist fabric of the show—pencils of light edging tortured faces, a symbolic chorus which flits in and out of the action, hand-held spots to pick out characters under stress, a blood-splashed door moved significantly about the stage, and actors stepping suddenly out of the story to harangue the audience. All of this was cast into a telegraphic and disjointed series of bits from Dostoevsky's novel, short scenes played harshly in the gray flicker of strobe-spots or pooled in light against a generally dark background.

Much as this sounds like an exercise in *épatement,* with Gershwin's clouds of gray that any Russian play can guarantee, the result in performance was powerful and convincing theater. The *Sunday Times*'s James Fenton was particularly nettled by the manner in which a knowledge of characters and plot was taken for granted by Lyubimov. Even the central double murder of the old pawnbroker and her sister was barely alluded to in a confusing strobe-lit swirl of activity around the blood-splashed door. But Fenton's sour and rather philistine caviling

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was beside the point, since the adaptors were clearly not interested in a banal retelling of the book's plot nicely decorated with set speeches in the style of London's National Theatre. Through the use of selected episodes, rhetoric, and dialogue, the play highlights the *effect* of the novel's traumatic events on Raskolnikov and the village-like collection of people around him. Not only the fierce protagonist but everyone is driven by self-justification, self-discovery, and excuses that are not merely declaimed but worked through in the play's action. Raskolnikov's faith in himself as the superior creature who knows no barriers in the service of a higher humanity is tested to the point of double murder. Slowly, horribly, he discovers that his autonomy is a chimera, that he is fettered to those around him by unbreakable ties of guilt, compassion, cruelty, love, and excruciating shame. This proves to be true not only with those who love him (his family, his friend Razumikhin, the prostitute Sonia) but also with those he despises (the repellent Svidrigailov, who blackmails him and tries to seduce his sister, the drunkard Marmeladov, even the deceptively clownish policeman, Porfiry Petrovich, who stalks him like an icy conscience).

This production pares away most of the novel's pemmican-like texture, but retains the moral ambiguities with astonishing success. Inexorably Raskolnikov is drawn into a confession of his crime and its expiation in a Siberian prison. But this satisfying nineteenth-century catharsis is not left at that. The actor playing Raskolnikov steps forward to read from a Russian student's essay on *Crime and Punishment,* a flat statement that Raskolnikov was right and should have got away with it,[1] as a hero and a rebel against unjust social conditions. With this rather cruel *coup de théâtre* we are jerked forward into the twentieth century, with its cacophony of sociological jargon about "underlying causes" and the refrain of "while I do not condone violence, yet . . ." and the other loud excuses for crime, antisocial behavior, and political terrorism. Was the production meant as an ironic reflection on all this? According to the program notes it "raised a storm of debate and polemic in Moscow"—hardly surprising in a country whose veritable (although unrepentant) Raskolnikov-figure of a government commits torture under the name of psychiatry, supports terrorism, and has in the past slaughtered literally millions of its own people in the name of a higher humanity.

By the time I reached London (via the Highlands of Scotland and Edinburgh) to see the show, I was too late to ask Lyubimov about his intentions. In an interview with *The Times,* he had openly criticized the Soviet regime and refused to retract even when threatened by an official of the Soviet embassy. Still proclaiming his intention to return to Moscow (where he is director of the famous Taganka Theater), he departed for Italy.

Whatever he really meant by the show, Lyubimov managed to dramatize successfully a ceremony in which contemporary man may (I borrow the words of Rebecca West) "play his part and reveal the character of the self." The need for such a drama, seen through Raskolnikov in fiction and through poor Gore-Graham in real (or surreal) life, is exposed as treacherous, possibly deadly; but our awkward fate is never to be rid of it. These serious matters are rarely handled with success in the theater (which tends to hover in those ticklish areas below the waist, or delve through obvious parts of the financial universe). Lyubimov and his collaborator Yuri Kariakin deserve praise for making it work so well on this occasion.

Those poignant sub-navel areas were much in vogue at the turn of the century and after with a certain school of dramatists and artists

1 This is oddly like an incident in which Tolstoy, a great believer in the moral instincts of the people, read *The Power of Darkness* to some of his serfs. In this play a ruthless child-killer suffers a terrible and condign fate. After the reading there was silence. "Well?" said Tolstoy. One of the serfs shook his head and remarked that if only the killer had been a little more clever, he could have got away with it.

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in Vienna. Some of the artists (Klimt, Egon Schiele, and others) were on display in *Vienna 1900,* a superb exhibition at the National Museum of Antiquities of Scotland, a centerpiece of this year's Edinburgh Festival. One of the period's dramatists, Frank Wedekind, furnished inspiration for an opera by Alban Berg, *Lulu,* part of the current season at London's Royal Opera in Covent Garden. Berg was very taken by two of Wedekind's plays, *Earth Spirit* and *Pandora's Box* (also made into a famous film with the American actress Louise Brooks). From these he fashioned *Lulu,* which was staged in a truncated version until 1979, when the completed score was premiered at the Opéra in Paris, a little over forty-three years after Berg's death. Covent Garden first produced it in 1981, and the revival this season is still an extraordinary piece of musical theater. The very excellence of it makes for the queer mixture of respect and repulsion which one feels sitting in the orchestra stalls and watching this hideous distaff parody of The Rake's Progress: Lulu, a vicious and sexy girl, moves through an increasingly sordid series of liaisons, including a marriage in which she drives her husband to suicide. In due course she shoots another "admirer" herself, is jailed for it, and then is helped to escape by a lesbian who has taken a fancy to her. Hounded on to Paris and then to London, the desperate creature sinks into lower and more degraded circumstances until, working as a cheap prostitute, she is murdered along with the lesbian by Jack the Ripper. In less talented hands than Alban Berg's the piece would turn into an involuntarily comic horror-burlesque.

The opera is well served by the cast and the conductor, who is Colin Davis. As Lulu the American singer Karan Armstrong projects an awful teutonic sexiness and energy in spite of her rather chunky contours. Brigitte Fassbinder as the lesbian is the best of a fine supporting cast. Sensitively conducted by Davis, the entire ensemble weaves text and music into a tight, unsettling performance of this nasty work. And yet one is compelled to ask: with the genius of Berg and the high quality of cast and musicians, why does the spectacle remain so loathsome? Time and again it evokes Baudelaire's famous poem *Une Charogne* (A Carrion):

> Les jambes en l'air, comme une femme
> lubrique,
> Brûlante et suant les poisons,
> ouvrait d'une façon nonchalante et cynique
> Son ventre plein d'exhalaisons.
> . . .
> Et pourtant vous serez semblable à cette
> ordure,
> A cette horrible infection,
> Étoile de mes yeux, soleil de ma nature,
> Vous, mon ange et ma passion!

Neither the ingeniously crafted music nor the opulent staging nor the smooth performances quite stifle this work's undercurrent of vindictive rage. The surface of it glistens with a sort of sweaty horror, but this is a puritan's horror, perverted into coarse and exuberant pleasure at the heroine's degradation. The basic emotional impulse, stemming from the roots of the opera in Wedekind's plays, is like that felt when walking into a crowded room, confronting a beautiful woman, and then seeing her eyes flick away in hard, chilly indifference. Watching *Lulu,* one is sucked into an enormous expense of spirit in a waste of shame, lust itself in action; it is like the work that provoked George Orwell to remark that it was fine but ought to be burned by the public hangman.

This is, however, not the most unpleasant experience to be had in London theater. When the National announced a new play by Christopher Hampton on an American theme, I looked forward to it with some anticipation. Hampton is an accomplished playwright, able to boast of several prestigious works of his own. In addition to these he has translated a wide range of other authors including Ibsen, Molière, Babel, and Chekhov, and both television and films have used his talent. Like many another successful dramatist, he has heard and hearkened to

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the call from California—not in this instance to write films, but to furnish a play for the Mark Taper Forum Theater in Los Angeles. This center, which seems to buy up the work of European playwrights rather as William Randolph Hearst used to buy up castles, asked Hampton to write a piece on European refugees from fascism during the 1940s, in particular the German émigrés who fled Hitler to settle in Los Angeles. A house and generous research facilities were provided, and Hampton met many of the period's survivors. The eventual result was *Tales From Hollywood,* premiered in Los Angeles and now, a year later, vouchsafed to the National's Olivier Theatre complete with an amusing if incongruous exhibition of *New Yorker* cartoons in the foyer.

I had better explain that the title is a parody of *Tales from the Vienna Woods*—not the Strauss waltz but a play that culled its title, a dreadful piece of Viennese theatrical deliquescence by the Austro-Hungarian Ödön von Horvath. (Hampton has translated three of his plays; the latest, *Faith, Hope, and Charity,* is scheduled for the Manhattan Theater Club in 1984.) Horvath was killed in a freak accident before the Second World War in Paris. Hampton resurrects him to play the part of ironic observer in the Hollywood of the 1940s. As an exile who escaped the Nazis, he watches with mildly bemused detachment while his fellow Teutons struggle in the unfamiliar surroundings of Southern California and are beastly the while to each other. There is a little invented romance with a Jewish girl to whom Horvath finally and melodramatically confesses a bit of minor collaboration with the Nazis. But this takes second or third place to the doings of Thomas and Heinrich Mann, Bert Brecht, Lion Feuchtwanger, the Marx Brothers, assorted wives, hangers-on, and, as they say, others. Of course everyone (among the Europeans) suffers from the crass demands of show-biz and what e. e. cummings called the You Were Say, but this does not make a story, or even an interesting documentary of the period. Instead Hampton opts for a scattering of slick vignettes gleaned mostly from the gossip of Feuchtwanger's over-ninety-year-old widow, whom he met in Hollywood. It would be unbearably tedious to sketch in all the scenes, but here is a representative sample: Heinrich Mann, a popular novelist in Germany but sadly obscure in America, is much mistreated by his famous brother Thomas and embarrassed by his awful wife. To wit: He has a birthday party. Everyone is there. His wife walks out of the kitchen with his birthday cake. She is wearing an apron and (I am still not sure if this was a visual pun or not) her birthday suit. Other scenes have Brecht wandering in and out making facile and mildewed jokes about Hollywood, America, etc., etc.; Johnny Weissmuller is made to swing onstage once, warbling like Tarzan, to shake hands with Thomas Mann; there is naturally a boorish producer very subtly named Charles Money whose taste is—how shall I put it?—demotic. At the end, after confessing his Nazi peccadillo and saying goodbye to his Jewish mistress, Horvath ends face down in a swimming pool.[2]

Of the actors wasted in this wretched *ad hoc* mess, Michael Gambon comes off best, not just because he is a very classy performer but also because his character—Horvath—is for most of the time relatively uninvolved in the stale and seedy collective goings-on. As Heinrich Mann's batty wife, Billie Whitelaw shows no obvious signs of embarrassment—in the circumstances a formidable achievement. What makes this whole enterprise so baffling is the number of far superior models for the game of scoring off Hollywood's cruelty and American cupidity. (Nathanael West comes to mind, as does Clifford Odets and, on the present level, even Budd Schulberg). That Hampton's warmed-over kitsch —whatever Los Angeles thought of it—should be served up on the main stage of Britain's subsidized National Theatre is a disgrace, apart from being an appalling waste of public money.

Looking away from this grotty present into

2 Part of Hampton's research consisted of a special private viewing of *Sunset Boulevard.* Hm.

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a more hopeful future, my eye caught an arrestingly silly *Guardian* report which predicted darkly that next year's Edinburgh Festival would be the last. The supposed replacement was to be a shuttling arrangement in which major British cities take it in turn, year by year, to host a festival of the arts. Now Edinburgh, almost a blend of Avignon and Paris dotted here and there with British tat, is one of the most beautiful cities on the island. My brief glimpse of this year's Festival confirmed that as a setting for the event Scotland's capital has no equal. But the city fathers have sometimes grudged the annual burden on municipal funds, and I feared there might be something to that apparently idiotic story.

The artistic director of next year's Edinburgh Festival is an old acquaintance, Frank Dunlop. When I asked him to say it ain't so he readily obliged. Though this year's roster of events was larger than ever—the Fringe alone strained the supply of venues to bursting point—there are no plans for a swan song in 1984. On the contrary, Dunlop means to expand the scope of the Festival, which until now has been a generally Euro-focused affair like this year's, with its Viennese theme in the visual arts and opera. The organization of a festival program usually takes about two years, and the time given Dunlop to put together next year's schedule is about six months. Nevertheless he means to reach out as far as Japan and the South Pacific, to find and bring in types of performance and other art which have not been seen in Edinburgh before. His intention is to broaden the scope of the Festival and make it a spectrum of world culture rather than a limited reflection of Western Europe and the United States. With luck he may also cure what the present organizers refer to as the Mafia syndrome, in which the same performers, especially in music, tend to be invited over and over again. Dunlop's record as a director in the theater is impressive and long. If his new career as festival director yields a similar success, the Edinburgh audiences will have some pleasant surprises next year.

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Art

A love of ruins: the art of Philip Pearlstein

by Dan Hofstadter

In Philip Pearlstein's *Female Model on a Ladder,* a painting in his current retrospective recently on view at the Brooklyn Museum,[1] there is an especially intriguing hand: it is intriguing because its owner has no face. The upper edge of the canvas crops the model's body at the collar bones, so the hand, answering mimetically to the purpose usually served by a face, becomes the focus of interest. The hand is resting palm down against its owner's thigh, supporting a certain amount of weight; it is a well-formed female hand with long tapering fingers and unpainted nails. At the wrist the styloid processes of the radius and the ulna markedly protrude; so do the so-called "saddle-joint" of the thumb, which is visibly cleft, and the head of the metacarpal, where the thumb bends. Like most women's hands this one is not very muscular, but it is vividly veined—a reminder that it is fed by a heart. And in fact both the basilic and cephalic veins of the forearm, which return blood to the heart, are easily discernible. The net of veins on the hand itself, which conspicuously shows the dorsal venous arch, seems unusually distended, as it is, say, in the hands of steamfitters and longshoremen; but the dorsal muscle of the thumb, the interosseous, is not especially developed, as it would be in any sort of manual worker. Of course other things than toil could have caused this venous prominence, such as prolonged athletic exertion, frequent excitement, or the onset of middle age.

I've been browsing in Gray's *Anatomy.* But it is not necessary to know anatomy to respond to the physiognomy of a hand. It is not only the blind, or the deaf, or doctors, athletes, and artists who can "read" the character of a hand: we all do it to a remarkable degree. In a well-known modern American novel a woman falls in love with a man because of the appearance of his hands. What all this goes to show is how much we should beware of the notion that the human figure —even with the head cropped, as in the Pearlstein painting—can ever be "emptied" of emotional meanings, though we cannot often put those meanings into words. It is the prevalent view that Mr. Pearlstein has performed this act of neutralizing the body, and that his work exemplifies an objective realism devoid of idealization or interpretation. That his art has not fared ill from receiving a commendation that would deny it all power of resonance is at once the measure of its handsomeness and the proof that the public has felt its wider vibrations. The

1 "Philip Pearlstein—A Retrospective" first appeared this spring at the Milwaukee Art Museum, whose curator, Russell Bowman, organized the exhibition; it was on view at the Brooklyn Museum from July 14 to September 25. It will be shown at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts in Philadelphia from December 14 to February 26, 1984, at the Toledo Museum of Art from March 18 to April 29, 1984, and at the Carnegie Institute in Pittsburgh from May 19 to July 15, 1984.

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notion that Mr. Pearlstein does not interpret his subject matter seems to me so wrong that it exists only to be taken issue with; and as some things must be said bluntly if they are to be said at all, I must say at the outset that I do not think that Mr. Pearlstein—except in two or three pictures—is a realist of any sort.

The catalogue for his retrospective[2] is based on the refreshing premise that people want pictures, not palaver. Russell Bowman's introduction provides a little historical background. Irving Sandler's brief essay introduces the reader to the artist's major concerns. Most germaine to our purposes however are those of Mr. Pearlstein's own reflections that are printed here. Unfortunately, Mr. Pearlstein, when he takes pen in hand, is a curmudgeon. He cherishes a cranky hope that he will irritate people, while at the same time rather grandly claiming that he has "rescued the nude." He rants against "existentialism," yet also asserts that he "lets the chips of interpretation fall where they will," which sounds to me like a very fancy definition of a certain sort of existentialism that I've never quite understood. "I am more intrigued by what I feel I cannot control in painting," he writes, "than by what I think I am doing . . . . The most fascinating of these uncontrollable factors is the implication of meanings that spring of their own accord from the work and seem to be the painting's real subject." This is an engaging way of putting it, though at times one may wonder if Mr. Pearlstein has not managed to stifle his fascination about these aboriginal meanings. But let us pass on to the pictures.

The earliest painting in the retrospective is a small panel, *Double Portrait of the Artist's Parents* of 1943. Remote in its immaturity from Mr. Pearlstein's later production, it yet heralds predilections that in time will become familiar—the juxtaposition of a male and a female model, the concoction of rueful tints, the depiction of sulky persons of a certain age. That the painter, in that first decade of his career, could still permit himself to make an occasional joke will surprise those who have suspected him of absolute humorlessness. But joke he did: another panel, *Death and the Maiden* of 1950, subtitled *Shower Attacking Woman,* is a highly entertaining little scherzo in blue and rose. This labyrinthine composition at first appears abstract, and, in that sense, composed of a unique and unknown substance. On closer inspection, however, like the nests of certain birds, it reveals materials of recognizable and astonishing provenance (among them a gesticulating plumbing fixture). It is quite as if a bird had decided to paint himself a picture—I mean no ordinary bird of course, but one out of a fable, with temperament.

The painter soon abandons such caprices. We perceive that he has succumbed to the lure of landscape, notably of rock palisades. Suddenly we meet him in Italy, trying to make monumental *vedute,* with abstract expressionist brushstrokes, of the cliffs at Positano. These pictures might be accounted a disappointment did they not so nearly realize what is probably impossible to achieve. The ambition, one gathers, was to reconcile the abstract expressionist aesthetic with an impulse to describe the volumes and joints of huge rock masses. Such rock masses, after all, are as "abstract" in their variegation as anything in nature, and fairly cry out to be rendered with a loaded brush: painting schools of the Sung Dynasty accomplished something of this sort a thousand years ago. But not one of the Chinese schools of landscape drawing has ever caught the bulkiness, the faceted weight, of great rocks; whatever their merits, on this score they are all conventionally eccentric, none more so than those of the Sung Dynasty. Like the Chinese ink drawings, Mr. Pearlstein's six-foot views never manage to convey the crystalline complexity, the feelable nooks and crannies, of a towering escarpment. The swinging blocks of bedrock and their enclosing fractures are never brought into alignment, into registration as it were, with the meanderings of the

2 *Philip Pearlstein: A Retrospective* was published by Alpine Fine Arts Collection; 274 pages, $20.

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brush. His scenes are as raveled as pig's guts, and as cloying, in the end, as the culinary preparations based on that animal's maw. One slips and slides through these turgid, red-accented, gory-looking landscapes unable to catch hold of anything tangible, though the ride is by no means without *frissons.* At last one understands that the artist simply cannot see his way to bringing off this particular endeavor, and soon he gives it up: Mr. Pearlstein will move on to something possible. Yet charming oddments remain—a lovely topographical drawing of a notched headland, some studies of a ruined arch. That arch especially will prove worth remembering.

If these Italian views offer the spectacle of an imagination at grips with what is simply too complex to ingest—the familiar "love of difficulty"—they scarcely prepare one for what follows. Mr. Pearlstein's first period, whatever one makes of it, is undeniably artistic, and full of temperament; in his next period, which spans the early Sixties, that temperament immolates itself. In his growing fascination with three-dimensional form he decides to return to the nude model, but, unversed in any of the skills of traditional studio painting, he must doggedly register every inch that he sees, touch by exacting touch. It is so much art-school drudgery. The models are flatly lighted, doing nothing, full of meaningless complications: the painted figures are out of drawing, lacklustre in color, overmodeled, and generally worked to death. Everywhere one senses a cramped forcing of the will: there is no aristocratic reserve, as if a mezzo-soprano, forgetting her place, were straining to hit coloratura territory. If these paintings seem the efforts of a superman, he is not a super-*artist,* but a super-art-student. One wavers between weeping at the sight of the fellow getting himself into a straightjacket and laughing at his extraordinary power to do it all by himself. Only time will show that the straightjacket is really a cunningly constructed pair of wings.

There is much to cavil at in these early pictures: the value-scale seems restricted and flat, as if Mr. Pearlstein is still shy of reaching up to the highest lights or down to the deepest accents; the figures look monochromatic, papery, drained of color, and often inaccurate in tone; and there is a studentish seeking for "interesting composition," as if mere composition were ever interesting enough. Having abandoned a subject for which he feels unfitted, the painter is left, it appears, with no subject at all. Still, one stops, here and there, to marvel. In *Two Models Lying on the Floor* (1964) the closer of the two bodies overlaps the farther at three points—rib cage "breaking" against hair, pelvis against breast, little toe against thigh—in a design as original as it is anxious and fragile. That the knee of the farther figure is drawn up and pointed, so to speak, at the viewer, thus flattening out the space, or that the head of the nearer figure is cropped just above the eye, may be put down to an instinct for interesting composition. But motive must necessarily press from all angles (including the unconscious) upon compositions instinctively arrived at, and surely the memory of Courbet's Sapphic couple is such a motive here. Unlike that pair, however, these two are not entangled but merely touching—how *much* they may be touching, in reality, skin to skin, is anyone's guess. That, of course, is the beauty of it—Mr. Pearlstein's interesting composition has a riveting metaphorical aspect. In the pictures of the following year there is even more to marvel at in the way of sensitive overlaps and croppings, and the handling of tone occasionally grows superfine. All at once these subjectless paintings read as *all* subject, these meaningless bodies as the purest flesh of emotion. How could it for long be otherwise? The body is the seat of metaphor—the very word "figure" means both "person" and "trope," and it is hard even to conceive of a painted figure that does not somehow "stand" for something.

Claims of originality are made for many painters, but the originality of Mr. Pearlstein's inventions of the mid-Sixties could probably be proven objectively. Every aberration loathed by most painters of the nude he claims for his art. Figures look distorted

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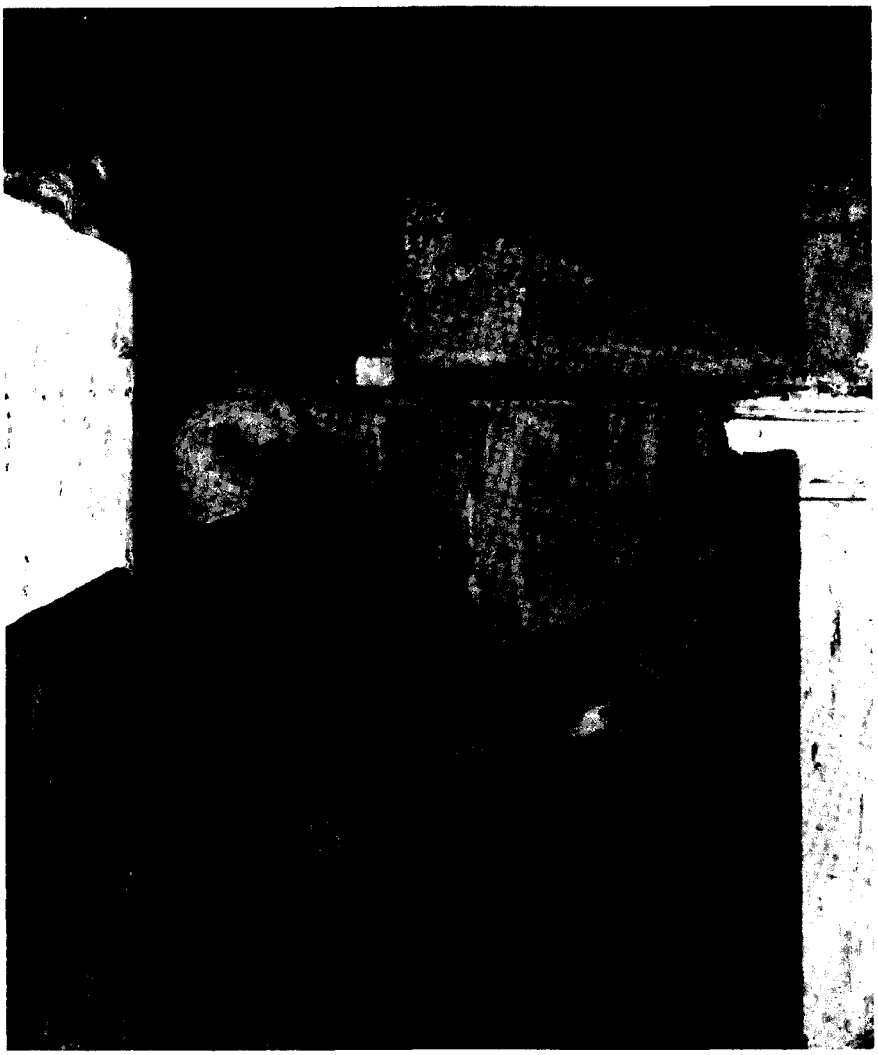
ALFRED H. MAURER

(1868 - 1932)

Modernist Paintings



"Still Life with Fish and Apples," c. 1928-32. Oil on gesso board, 21¾ x 18 inches.

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from being seen from a close vantage; they are cropped in a way that apparently despoils the pose of its sense; and they are lighted so as to project multiple shadows, sometimes on themselves, and to lose all the drama of glitter and gloom. They are also modeled in chalky monochromes that ignore the ruddy cast of the facial features, elbows, knees, and hands, as well as the bluish tint of other zones, like the temples. They are sometimes awkwardly drawn, and usually represented in a boring studio environment. Lastly, as I have already indicated, they overlap each other in ways that can be confusing or ambiguous.

Mr. Pearlstein attains the maturity of his powers between about 1965 and 1969. It is in the canvases of this period that one discerns the emergent and enduring themes. A certain illiberal sort of criticism tends to lump all a painter's pictures together and discuss his "sensibility." This procedure is unfair to Mr. Pearlstein not only because his work is as uneven as most artists' commonly is but also because he has explored his various interests in at least three somewhat distinct manners. Here are single nudes, pairs of females nudes, and couples of mixed gender (there are no pictures of male pairs); here too are portraits, both single and double.

It is above all in the double nudes that Mr. Pearlstein comes into his own as a maker of monumental compositions. Though not all of the figures are in fact "heroic" in scale (that is, distinctly larger than life), they virtually all seem so because of the low angle of vision, the strange cropping, or the looming nearness of certain parts of the anatomy, an effect reminiscent of wide-angle photography but actually caused by the closeness of the artist's canvas to his subjects during painting sessions. In picture after picture one nude slightly overlaps another, as if they were momentarily magnetized by each other, or held apart in static repulsion within each other's intimate space. The background, usually a bare white wall, may be elegantly sliced by multiple shadows, so that it resembles a Juan Gris still life. The flesh too is sliced by these shadows, and cropped at critical junctures, such as just above a fulcrum (the feet, a steadying hand) or just below the face, thereby forfeiting the gesture of the eyes. The modeling seems to collapse the body from a unified field of force into a pile of constituent parts, as if it were a doll that had been taken apart and put clumsily back together again. In *Two Nudes with Back of Painting* (1965) much of Mr. Pearlstein's future procedure in figure painting is already apparent. The bodies are lighted by at least three lights, which creates an effect of rugosity particularly about the salient points of the anatomy, like the shoulder blades, the anterior iliac crests, the spurs of the wrists, the metacarpals, the kneecaps, and their suprapatellar bulges, etc. This sort of extreme definition, this hypnotic accounting for every knob, dimple, and groove, is called "overmodeling" by artists because it describes parts in detail without subduing them to the effect of the whole. A flaw in most other painters' work, it is an essential component of Mr. Pearlstein's style. As a rule the figures are painted in neutral tints; in depicting the shifting hues of his models Mr. Pearlstein evidently has no facility, or no interest, which is much the same thing. Generally he paints his people white in tone. Their complexions have no *morbidezza,* no fleshly softness, and for that matter no *sfumatezza* either, that quality of shifting irridescence so characteristic of the human hide. All this might well be made the ground of a reproach, but it is quite equally a warrant. In trying to observe things dispassionately, Mr. Pearlstein perpetrates a good many mistakes—I mean mistakes of simple observation, not of style—of which he would doubtless be the last to acquit himself. But he is shrewd and venturesome enough not to correct them; the ointment must have its flies.

Mr. Pearlstein changes his manner a bit when he paints a portrait, if only because the head becomes so important. Five portraits from this period are displayed in the current retrospective. Of these the finest, I think, is *Mr. and Mrs. Pommer.* Here a gentleman

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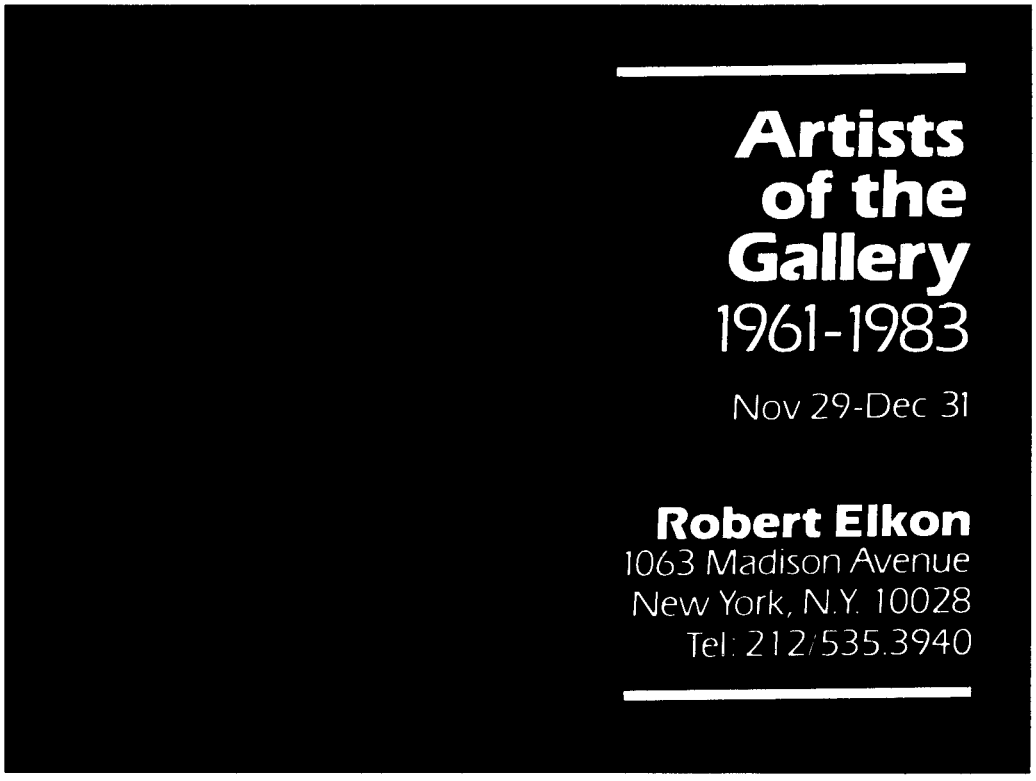

and a lady (the lady is Linda Nochlin) are stretched from the top to the bottom of the composition. The clothes, including the lady's Marimekko dress, are dully rendered: Mr. Pearlstein is uninterested in drapery folds, presumably because they have traditionally expressed grace, whether Christian or heathen, and Mr. Pearlstein dislikes grace. The value-scheme is weak, being mostly whitish or whitish-gray, and seems to call for a more somber note, like a quartet without a cello. The setting is not, one assumes, the actual habitat of this youngish couple, but a clinically sterile corner of the artist's studio. The juxtaposition of a piano stool and a white cane chair with little volutes running amok casts a questionable light on the sitters' character. The heads however *are* finely studied for character, and I mention this because it is the only portrait but one—and that is a self-portrait—of which this can be said. Both the lady and the gentleman sit with arms crossed, his over the midriff, hers over the groin, as if in double denial of their physicality. Considering the luxuriance of self-denials in all the surrounding pictures, one may perhaps have leave to wonder if these crossed-out bodies fairly depict the couple in question. But that of course is not a public issue. What is public, and visible to anyone, is the ragged rivulet of untenanted space that divides the bodies from each other and that is broken only where her knee grazes, tangentially, his pant-leg. Yet even that is an illusion: it occurs only in the two-dimensional plane of the canvas, for the sitters must actually have been posing a good two feet apart. The picture seems punched askew by the fact that one of these figures sits upright, more or less parallel to the viewer, while the other leans steeply into the background. This is more than a stunning feat of design, it is also a poetic representation of a certain pathos in the nearness of person to person. And though it may not be an accurate description of the relations of this particular couple, the device can be taken as emblematic of a certain ubiquitous emotional quandary. Indeed I think Mr. Pearlstein intends

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it so, if only because he uses it everywhere. As a transcendent idea it works better on anonymous models, but then it must be said that Mr. Pearlstein is not—not at all—a natural portrait painter. He has gotten the shadow on *Allan Frumkin*'s face with a soiling black, and the light on his hands with a staring white. *Scott Burton*'s mouth is way off center, and his naked chest seems made of taffeta. In *Portrait of the Artist's Daughters* (1970), two plain little girls, ambiguously placed as in the Pommer picture, stare into vacancy as only miserably bored young children can. One of them has placed her hand on the head of the chaise longue on which they sit, the palm flat down in an implausibly stiff position. Who's been tormenting these poor moppets? And how have they gotten so pale—has somebody boiled them? They look for all the world like the middle-aged *putti* of certain old masters. Since we've learned from the title that they are the artist's children, we know just who's to blame. Naughty papa! But *so* naughty? Could it not be that he is, in secret, a rather nice papa, even a closet sweetie, and that he is so wary of throwing a vulgar sop to his child-loving audience that he must present his own children as despairing waifs? Heaven forbid that Mr. Pearlstein, like those nullities Holbein, Raeburn, and Manet, should ever end up painting a cute kid. Is it not possible that a certain dour highmindedness has slipped here into an ill-tempered need to offend; and, moreover, that the resulting provocation has come directly in the way of a much-vaunted objectivity? One fears for the strongest artists when they start to "communicate."

The painter has another group of canvases in which he plots neither collisions nor collusions. These are his single female nudes with decorative backgrounds, doubtless his most sumptuous and companionable pictures. There are five or six of them—the first is the *Nude on a Striped Drape* of 1967, the last to date is the *Female Model on a Brocade Sofa* of 1975. They are not all alike, not all executed in quite the same manner; but they run to a sort of hard-edged, enameled elegance reminiscent by turns of Balthus, Ingres, Pontormo, even Mantegna. Here one discovers a surprisingly refined and Latin sort of vision, revealing that Mr. Pearlstein —to borrow Ingres's phrase—has "more than one brush." The multiple shadows, if not wholly banished, have been curtailed on these de-eroticized odalisques, and the unnatural whiteness of their flesh—reminiscent of the tint of ivory or unpolished rice—stands out suavely from the deeper-toned background fabrics. These textiles provide what I have described as the somber note missing from Mr. Pearlstein's paler pictures. Everything in this rich music—composition, drawing, color, modeling—comes as close to perfection as anyone could hope, a perfection achieved without the abandonment of those wracking serpentine poses that give the style its hint of menace and mortality. With heads averted or eyes closed, these hybrid women are like hibiscus blooms reflected in a dark window, just a moment past their prime. The feverish-looking pallor of the *Female Model Reclining on an Empire Sofa* of 1973 may at first glance seem artificial. But painting *is* an artifice, and the discrepancy between a realistic complexion and this quaintly wan one is the difference between "the horribly resemblant" and the metaphorically expressive. This "false" skin tone is—again—the warrant of Mr. Pearlstein's temperament.

Whatever the pleasures of this collection of single nudes, the "chips of interpretation" do not begin to fall hard and fast until we enter the rooms reserved for Mr. Pearlstein's classic phase, which more or less coincides with the Seventies. One feels it a classic phase because here all the most original elements of the style have been brought to their keenest pitch, without any bravura or over-elaboration, on an ample scale. The relation between two people is essential to the idea's emotional resonance, and virtually all these paintings show a pair of models. One quickly takes the measure of this perplexity, quickly learns that two naked people can as likely pose together without exciting

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Toward The Wood II, oil, 1982, 34" x 44"

DAVID LUND
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sexual tension as two duelists can face off without raising the specter of death. It seems at times that Mr. Pearlstein laments this fact, and would prefer to smother the tension, to pretend he is merely composing a sort of abstract two-part invention. But the very fact that he never paints two male models together is a tacit admission that the chips *must* fall. He cannot have his cake and eat it too—cannot have the mask without the face. Mr. Pearlstein has hung about himself the air of a shy, tough American just doing his job, and those who have been simple enough to fall for this camouflage have compared his work to the emotionless art of his American contemporaries in the Sixties. But his pictures actually *look* a good deal more like certain of Stanley Spencer's or Lucian Freud's compositions, unsettling as the parallel may be. The chief difference of course is that whereas the two Britons wallow in sexual allusions, the American is like somebody continually making off-color slips of the tongue and then refusing to acknowledge the double entendre. But actually of course he is too arch by half—it is all planned, all scripted. By declining to be explicit about feeling he has compressed it, like a gas, so it always seems ready to explode.

Take *Male and Female Nudes Reclining* (1970), not one of my favorites, but a good example of this pressurization. The edge of a cot divides the canvas diagonally in half; reclining on this cot, her head propped up by her arm, a woman looks sullenly downward. Directly in her line of vision, on the floor beneath her, lies a man, supine, his body cut at the testicles by one framing edge and just below the eyes by another. One of his arms is also cropped, a few inches below the elbow; the other forearm rests on the upper abdomen in the "pronate" position, that is, palm down, in an attitude suggestive, both in our culture and in the history of art, of exhaustion or defeat. The impression of a casualty in the battle of love is unavoidable. Here, as in so many of Mr. Pearlstein's other double nudes, the bodies seem to be falling away from each other in a mood of mutual disgust, repulsion, or dissatisfaction, as if in

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illustration of some gelid moment after the priapic grapple—*post coito omne animal triste.* Needless perhaps to say, this is an unusual impression in the annals of art, where nudes, single or in pairs, more frequently inhabit an arrested instant of charm or mounting desire preceding sensual pleasure. Never as in this retrospective has one seen so many intimations of spent passion.

In a double portrait from this period, *Portrait of Mr. and Mrs. Edmund Pillsbury* (1973), Mr. Pearlstein rides the same nightmare. He has as usual lighted his married couple so as to produce the greatest effect of corrugation in the faces, and what a grim, tight-lipped pair they make—I speak of course of the Pillsburys of the painting, not the Pillsburys of real life such as the painting would lead us to imagine them. Actually I doubt that the real Pillsburys are like this, if only because the painted Pillsburys so greatly resemble the rest of Mr. Pearlstein's personnel, who are all chipped off the same block, except for the Pommers, and the artist himself, and one or two other persons to whom a dram or two of individuality has been vouchsafed. The lady sits beside the gentleman on a sofa, resting her elbow on its back and letting her left hand, with its diamond ring, droop forward beside her husband's shoulder. Is she actually touching him? We don't know, we can't quite make it out—it is very cunningly contrived, this. Certainly if she is sitting that close to him she *ought* to be touching him, or he her. They seem to be freezing each other out. The diamond-studded lady appears weirdly rapacious, and her head, reflected in profile in a mirror placed directly behind her husband, looks narrow-eyed and vulturine and released from its shoulders, so that one wouldn't be much surprised if it flew off to hover in the air in search of carrion. Into such ghoulish crannies can the chips of interpretation occasionally—rather too often—fall.

If this painting suggests a certain deficiency in the social subtleties we must again remember that Mr. Pearlstein has more than one brush. The Philadelphia Museum's *Two Female Models with Drawing Table* (also of 1973) is of a wholly different order and, to this viewer, at least, a vastly more entertaining one. Here the artist very nearly gains the fabulous good fortune of being able to hide behind his art. Not that the sexual nerve has quite ceased to throb in response to these two nude women, for the urge to invidious comparison still tempts, especially in that one of them stands plump and nubile, with coquettishly roseate nipples (an effect usually barred from these paintings), while the other hunches haggard and bony, her head bowed, her nipples mauve and matronish. There is the suggestion of a contrast between womanhood before and during the cares of maternity. Yet the theme—if theme it is—is almost negligible, a mere pretext for a piece of impeccable drawing and composition. In no picture does Mr. Pearlstein more delicately orchestrate his croppings, his multiple shadows, his juxtapositions of frontal and foreshortened forms than in this . . . masterpiece.

In the late Seventies some of Mr. Pearlstein's old interests reappear. He seems to delight—wryly as I take it—in the most preposterous furniture produced in the last century or so: Victorian sofas, platform rockers, bentwood beds, Eames chairs, and those knobby Adirondack rockers that look like dead fruit trees. This furniture which, stuffed or not, fulfills its timeworn analogical function of mimicking the human body, seems ever-ready to rise in revolt and give the nudes a sound thrashing, as in the early *Shower Attacking Woman.* At the same time the walls of the atelier that seems the location of every one of these pictures become steadily more oppressive. These walls—as naked as the people—compose a sort of cell, so that the models seem thrice imprisoned, first in their own weary corporeality, then in the white ennui of the studio, and finally in the picture itself. Plenty of shadows and reflections in mirrors add their ghostly presence. The sense of imminent decay is enhanced by Mr. Pearlstein's odd and rather morbid habit of painting hair (including pubic hair) cooled off by incandescent light as though it were gray. But the kindest thing

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that can be said of most of his female models is that they are no longer—as the phrase is—"in their first youth." They are, roughly speaking, in their third youth, that is, at an age to avoid the sort of direct lighting Mr. Pearlstein pays them to sit under. But then Mr. Pearlstein is keen on wreckage. We remember the ruins of his early Italian drawings, and all at once in the mid-Seventies he proposes a reprise of the entire theme. There is a big picture of the Indian ruins in the Canyon de Chelly, several views of Machu Picchu, and several more of the rooftops of New York looking ruined, as it were, in advance. These latter are labyrinths seen from the air.

Indeed, at this period Mr. Pearlstein seems to be flying very close to the sun, painting like a virtuoso—"like an angel." Every ridge and eminence, every wrinkle and groove is skillfully delineated; the body is often shattered into tiny bits and pieces; acres of wearisome wall-space, furniture, and flooring are minutely rendered; and there grows a certain fondness for tubular lighting and a greasy streaky modeling up and down the limbs that recalls the dubious taste of some late Gothic masters. A pair of pushy rattan chairs, painted without affection, stage a coup and take over three paintings, holding the figures hostage. And on this note of suspense the retrospective ends. One may well wonder if Mr. Pearlstein is winning or losing this particular struggle. I think he is winning—having managed, at long last and with exquisite finish, to create a sort of painting that is an absolute non-conductor of emotion. The super-art-student has resurfaced. But Mr. Pearlstein is almost sixty, and many a painter's seventh decade is the most electric and unpredictable of his life. He may start losing again, or painting with all of his brushes at once, and who knows then where those chips of interpretation may fall.

One of Mr. Pearlstein's most recent paintings is a watercolor self-portrait in which he appears to be standing atop one of the Roman hills. That is fitting, because Mr. Pearlstein is a sort of Roman—not merely because he served as a soldier in Italy during the war, has lived in Rome on a grant, and has made the Italian trip some four or five other times. It is a question of a spiritual affinity with the brutal elegance and misanthropy of the city where the "triumph" was a theatrical form and the "trophy" an architectural motif. It is also a question of *virtù*—the achievement of pure physical skill in an art—which Mr. Pearlstein has believed in and acquired and, having acquired it, outrun his competitors in the arena. But there is more to his Romanness than even that. For the truth is that far from being a realist he is an idealizing painter of the Italian type, or rather an American imprint of the Italian type, but blunter and harsher and more aware of the erosions of time.

This may seem a peculiar assertion until one remembers the distinction between realism and naturalism. Naturalism is the painting of what we see as we see it; it started I think in ancient Egypt and it is still with us—Mr. Pearlstein is a naturalist. But realism is another kettle of fish altogether. Velásquez's *The Water-seller* is a piece of realism, and there is a big painting of a butchershop by one of the Caraccis in Christ Church College that might qualify as realism. But on the whole it is a Dutch and then a modern phenomenon. The great modern realists, like Menzel or Caillebotte, not only paint what they see, they also take what they find: the streets, the dwellings, the people as one may come upon them clothed or unclothed. Mr. Pearlstein does not do this. Out of the enormous range of models available in New York he selects those who exhibit primarily one physiognomic type: the thin white female rather past her biological prime. He then poses her "under fixed, overhead, cool flood lights . . . in rows of three . . . on each side of the studio, sixteen inches apart"—a sort of lighting seldom found anywhere else, except perhaps in salesrooms and galleries, and which is bound to make her look drawn and disjointed and distended in the veins. Having created with his lighting this haggard vision in an environment too clinical to look lived in, he paints

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her very carefully. Small wonder, considering his fondness for pale flesh tones, that her image will be brittle and ivory-hued. Her pose will express exhaustion and her mouth pout in boredom, not because she is necessarily like that—many models can look lively for hours—but because he necessarily wants her that way. He is painting—not always but often—his *idée fixe*. Nothing, he seems to be saying, will redeem this body—not love, not sex, not God, not even Oreos and milk. He is a lover of ruins, and so must see the signs of ruination—the knotted veins, the graying hair, the blood-drained flesh—rather before their time. If this is a form of idealization—or better put, the creation of a poetic archetype—it is certainly not idealization toward the beautiful. Yet neither is it that "idealization toward the grotesque" that so fascinated Balzac and Ruskin. For Mr. Pearlstein's nudes are not grotesque but embody an archetype that, like Pontormo's or Rosso Fiorentino's, is *sui generis* and not really translatable into words.

No reader of *Middlemarch* will soon forget the passage where George Eliot's young Puritan heroine Dorothea forms her first impression of Rome:

> Ruins and basilicas, palaces and colossi, set in the midst of a sordid present, where all that was living and warm-blooded seemed sunk in the deep degeneracy of a superstition divorced from reverence; the dimmer but yet eager Titanic life gazing and struggling on walls and ceilings; the long vistas of white forms whose marble eyes seemed to hold the monotonous light of an alien world; all this vast wreck of ambitious ideals, sensuous and spiritual, mixed confusedly with the signs of breathing forgetfulness and degradation, at first jarred her as with an electric shock, and then urged themselves on her with that ache belonging to a glut of confused ideas which check the flow of emotion.

These "long vistas of white forms" were repellent to Dorothea because she had not discovered their meaning. The Pearlstein retrospective offers another sort of long vista whose white forms may well jar a good many viewers, and check their flow of emotion. But here there is no meaning to be discovered, no catechism or mythology to be learned. That is the capital difference between Dorothea's Rome and ours.

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Theater

Without feathers

by Mimi Kramer

"Look, darling," said the press agent for *La Cage aux folles* back in August, "forget it! You're talking about *the* smash-hit musical of the year. You won't even be able to *buy* a *house* seat until October!" But, I persisted (feeling foolish), didn't they want the show to get written about? "*Darling,* of course they do," said the press agent in a tone that perfectly conveyed the message, "Darling, they don't give a rotten banana *who* writes about this show. This show was a smash before it ever hit the boards!"

The press agent proved to be right. As the weeks went by, a ticket to *La Cage aux folles* was not to be had for love or money. Even the mixed reviews seemed to have no effect on ticket sales. After the requisite full-pager in *The New York Times,* in fact, the producers didn't even advertise the show for days. They didn't have to. *La Cage* was the sort of runaway hit that nothing could stop.

Human nature being what it is, it is hard not to yearn for what one cannot have. Besides, how could anyone *not* want to see a big jolly musical based on Jean Poiret's farce about two aging homosexuals who run a transvestite nightclub in St. Tropez and the chagrin they suffer when their distressingly heterosexual "son" decides to bring his intended and her distressingly reactionary clan home to meet the "family"? True, Frank Rich (if you read his review carefully) had been as discreetly unenthusiastic as it is possible for a *New York Times* critic to be about a Broadway musical that was a smash before it ever hit the boards. But even Rich had made *La Cage aux folles* sound like good fun, an old-fashioned makes-ya-sorta-happy-and-sends-ya-out-hummin' musical.

So when a ticket actually did come my way I was quite pleased about it. What I remembered about the film version of *La Cage aux folles* was not the plot (admittedly pretty wooden-headed) but the spirit of the thing —its zany innocence. Perhaps most memorable of all was the character of the middle-aged drag queen, who as "Zaza," still (although just barely) delights the patrons of the club from which the farce takes its name, but as Albin so exasperates Georges—his long-suffering lover and his manager of twenty years. Poor "Zaza," who must be put out of sight along with the embarrassing furniture when the prospective in-laws come to visit.

Of course, some of the movie's more salacious gags would have to be cleaned up for Broadway—Jacob, for instance, the ornery black butler who prances around in a parlor-maid's cap and apron (and nothing else), weeping copious tears over the removal of some of the apartment's smuttier decor and referring to Jean-Michel (Georges's son) as "the little white master." By the same token, some of the subtler gestures that had made the movie so poignant might be lost on a big Broadway stage. One remembered in particular the sad little scene in which Jean-Michel suggests to his father that not only Albin but his father too is a little unusual. He touches

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his father's cheek for a moment, then turns and runs his fingers down the whitewashed wall behind him, leaving a trail of "pancake" make-up behind. Try constructing a musical comedy turn around that one!

But the figure of Albin could remain intact—amusing and absurd in his flamboyant feathers, aging (and not well), perfectly projecting the aspect of a wounded mother peacock. This, surely, could be easily translated into the medium of musical comedy; for Harvey Fierstein had written the book for *La Cage aux folles* and the Tragedy of Camp was Harvey Fierstein's forte. The Tragedy of Camp was, after all, precisely what Fierstein had expressed so well in his play *Torch Song Trilogy* in the person of Arnold Beckoff, another lovable drag queen and figure of flamboyant theatricality whose hopelessly melodramatic nature had made us laugh even as we watched it come close to ruining his life.

Sitting in the darkened theater before *Torch Song Trilogy,* I had felt a little nervous. On the stage had sat Arnold Beckoff in full drag before a small vanity table, making up his face. "I'm among the last of a dying breed," he had said. Harvey Fierstein's hero (I use the word advisedly) was a transvestite and he wasn't sure how he felt about it. That was okay by me: I wasn't sure how I felt about being there in the first place. How different the feeling in the audience was before *La Cage aux folles*! Everyone was glad to be there, myself included. The houselights dimmed and a shudder of cymbals gave way to four undistinguished bars of Your Basic Musical Comedy Orchestration. The curtain rose and the audience burst into a hysterical round of applause. It was to be the pattern of the evening: wild acclamation for minimum achievement.

The audience was showing its appreciation for a large, two-story house painted not-quite-shocking pink against the monochrome background of a painfully beautiful blue sky. Suddenly the two halves of the house parted, turned, and came together again to present us with a back view of the same house and of its charming Mediterranean courtyard. The audience squealed with delight and again applauded wildly. But wait! There was more. The two halves parted yet again and, turning another ninety degrees, revealed still another facade. And as they parted a long white curtain began to spread across the stage, cascading in a silent fantasy of gauze.

Pandemonium broke out in the audience. The man in front of me seemed near to dying of emotion. There was glory for you! Thirty-two bars, forty-five seconds, and thousands of dollars in scenery construction had carried us from outside "La Cage aux folles" to the nightclub stage. If you were not impressed by this *tour de force* you were out of luck. For artistic achievement you had had it for the evening.

It is almost impossible to convey just how bad *La Cage aux folles* was: how boring, how stupid, how drab. "Go on with you!" you protest. "Wasn't it fun?" *Fun?* It was like spending the evening in an airport chapel. With nothing else to think about you pondered, "Is all this more gaudy than it is insincere? Or is it more insincere than it is gaudy?" Fun! I sat there with my face frozen on the way to a sort of death-grin, half-poised for the smile, the chortle, the amused grunt that never came. Each opportunity for wit or gaiety—a clever song, a funny line, an absurd gesture—went hurtling by like an empty subway car. Not a song, not a line, not a gesture captured anything of the spirit of fun and naughtiness of the original. Gone was the zaniness and the *joie de faire mal.* The face that *La Cage aux folles* had turned to the world was so embarrassingly bland that you almost had to look away.

What I had counted on was, at the very least, showmanship—in Albin's antics as a virtuoso histrionic, for example, or in his performances as a drag queen. But the character of "Zaza" was gone. *La Cage aux folles* had lost its prime mover: the transvestite.

The plot of *La Cage aux folles* hinges on Albin's inability to behave "like a man," which causes him to dress up like a woman and pass himself off as Georges's wife. But

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where Albin cannot help walking and speaking like a woman, George Hearn—the actor who played him in the Broadway production—could not begin to do so. He did not mince, he did not pout. Gone was the fellow who had made you laugh because he could not eat toast "like a man" and in his place was a musical-comedy star who kept putting on dresses and who occasionally executed the odd flamboyant gesture with studied precision. That George Hearn was a Red Sox fan you could well believe. But that he was the star of a transvestite floor show? Never! George Hearn was a drag queen, he and Gene Barry were homosexual lovers, only by means of a theatrical convention, the way Joan Fontaine and Olivia de Havilland used to "become" plain in certain Hollywood movies: because it said so in the script.

"We are what we are," sang the chorus of "transvestites." "And what we are is an illusion." Only it wasn't. They were a chorus of men dressed up like women and they looked like a chorus of men dressed up like women. They were the Yale tennis team out for a fancy-dress frolic. Accordingly, when they all pulled off their wigs at the end of a plodding production number in order to show that they were mostly men, the effect was rather like that of playing hide-and-seek with your four-year-old niece: "Oh *there* you are!" (mock surprise). Like George Hearn, the chorus of "transvestites" could not have moved or spoken or acted like women if their jobs had depended on it. Which was the astonishing thing, really: that their jobs had not depended on it.

One had known from the reviews that *La Cage aux folles* had been "sanitized" for Broadway consumption. What one had not known was that there would be no homosexuality at all. In the movie, Albin is most himself when he is in drag, pretending to be what he is not: hence, the joke is on Mr. Dindon, the moral-majority-type politician whom Albin manages to gull. But George Hearn and his cast of thousands were incapable of seeming to be anything but what they were. Consequently, the joke in *La Cage aux folles,* as adapted for the musical stage, is on everyone except the producers. Most of all, the joke (sadly, I think) is on Harvey Fierstein.

One of the things that had made *Torch Song Trilogy* so interesting was Harvey Fierstein's use of the figure of the transvestite to explore that side in human nature which expresses itself in self-conscious theatricality as a way of avoiding truths rather than coming to terms with them. High up on the revolving platform above the stage the torch-singer had crooned:

> You might find the night-time
> The right time for kissing;
> But night-time is my time
> For just reminiscing.

With each verse her gestures seemed to become more exaggerated in their tragic flamboyance and self-pity, a style that seemed to say, "Yes, I'm being excessive; but my witty, self-conscious exaggerations indicate that I'm aware of it. So it's all right."

> Regretting instead of
> Forgetting with somebody else.

Music to be miserable by, Arnold Beckoff calls the whole torch-song genre. He defines its ethos as a state of mind that can never really be happy because it is not really certain that it *wants* to be.

The spirit of ambivalence toward happiness—like that of the speaker in the song who would "rather be lonely than happy with somebody else"—can be recognized (heaven knows!) in homosexual and heterosexual patterns of action alike. But the figure of the torch-singer in the first act of *Torch Song Trilogy* drew a connection between this state of mind and the personality of Camp, that persona which cannot exist apart from an audience, which goes on mugging and clowning and grimacing its self-conscious commentary on life even when there is no one there to see. Through the figure of the torch-singer, Harvey Fierstein managed to connect the several themes

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he wanted to explore in his play and locate them in the person of his hero: ambivalence, hypocrisy (in its root sense of "playing a role"), and self-deception. That Arnold Beckoff was a homosexual was merely important to the situation; that he was a drag queen was essential. Arnold Beckoff was ambivalent about his identity. He made his living pretending to be something he was not, yet off-stage he wanted, or so he claimed, to be loved and respected for what he really was. A transvestite pretends to be a woman, a real woman; a drag queen only strives to be a parody of a woman, making himself ridiculous to others. The drag queen has a sense of humor about himself. His tragedy is that he thinks that that is enough.

There was every reason to expect that Harvey Fierstein would be able to do for "Zaza" what he had done for Arnold Beckoff in *Torch Song Trilogy*. And, sure enough, the opening scene in *Torch Song Trilogy* has its situational counterpart in *La Cage aux folles*. When Albin sits down at his vanity table to create his disguise in preparation for his nightclub act, "Aha!" you think, "Now we'll be getting somewhere!" But the song he sings ("Mascara") reduces the phenomenon of transvestism to a garden-variety antidote for life's rougher moments and makes homosexuality synonymous with everyday depression: "When life is a bitch again/I put down the john-seat again/And put a little more mascara on."

The original script of *La Cage aux folles,* if it had any point at all, tried to demonstrate that these fellows were human beings just like us. It tried to justify their feathers. But somewhere between Paris and New York the message of the piece changed. For by the time *La Cage aux folles* arrived on Broadway those fellows had *become* just like us and their feathers had ceased to be funny, ceased to be an expression of a state of mind and had become instead the expression of an ordinary interest in plumage. Coming from Harvey Fierstein, the message was a disappointing surprise. The last thing one would have expected from him was his complicity in turning the figure of the transvestite into a sort of cipher, an empty symbol holding the place for the real Camp figure whose identity must be suppressed.

Needless to say, with the homosexual element went most of the conflict in *La Cage aux folles* and most of the interest. Because there is no other way of *establishing* that Georges and Albin are lovers, they have to keep *telling* one another that they are, repeating their litany of long-standing affection like a couple of business associates who have been double-crossing one another for years. Gone was the element of tension between the two men that had made you care about them in the film: the fear you shared with Albin that Georges was growing tired of his lover's childish tantrums and that his attention was beginning to wander.

If *La Cage aux folles* was going to cast off its drama, it might have kept its gaiety. But the gaiety is gone, *disparu.* Had it not been for the first-half closer, this need not have been much more than a shame. Jerry Herman's lyrics, however, made it rather hard to take. George Hearn's impassioned rendition of the song "I Am What I Am," in view of the style of the production, brought on an almost physical revulsion. "Your life is a sham," sang George Hearn, his blood vessels bulging with righteous indignation, "Till you can shout out, 'Hey world! I am what I am!'" Oh how I wanted to shout something back. But my mind reeled before the task of answering so brazen a display of cowardice. So when George Hearn made his dramatic exit up the aisle I followed him: up the aisle, out of the theater, through the lobby and into the street with the audience's tumultuous ovation ringing in my ears. What I was escaping, more than anything else, was an odor of sanctity; I might have expected it in a church service, but it had nothing to do with a slightly risqué musical comedy. Plunging out into the squalid lights of Broadway I felt an overpowering desire to do something really naughty. So I took my ticket stub, offered it to the grimiest, most unsavory hoodlum loitering under the marquee, forcibly propelled him toward the theater, and disappeared into the wicked night.

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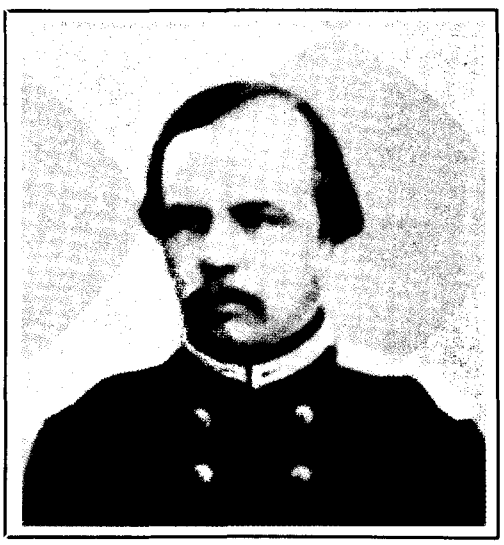

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Books

Saying no to life

by Nikolai Tolstoy

Professor Martin Green has set himself a bold task. *Tolstoy and Gandhi, Men of Peace*[1] is the double biography of two extraordinary men, both of whom exerted enormous influence over their contemporaries, combined into what amounts to a single, intertwined "life." As he explains in his introduction: "The plan of this book is to present the two lives side by side, in all their various phases, in such a way as to reveal the historical forces to which they were always responding." This results in a succession of parallel phases in which Professor Green detects marked psychological and ideological similarities; he intersperses his discussions of these with expositions of the common ground he finds himself treading.

These parallel periods are of course staggered chronologically, since the lives only partially overlapped. Tolstoy was born in 1828 and died in 1910, while Gandhi was born in 1869 and assassinated in 1948. It goes without saying that the historical overlap is almost wholly marginal. Tolstoy was a Russian, a nobleman, and above all a very great writer. Gandhi was a middle-class Indian, living at a time when his "country" was governed by a tiny minority of Europeans from the other side of the world, and first and foremost a politician. As he wrote, "I myself was born into a family of politicians"; his father was chief minister of a small Gujerati state. There is an unexpected contrast here, for though Tolstoy was a member of the old Russian aristocracy, neither his father nor he took any political office worth mentioning. He lived at a time when many nobles were disenchanted with politics in general, a disenchantment which had a great influence on Tolstoy's social thinking.

Where Tolstoy and Gandhi strike a common chord is not in their social or racial background or in their most striking personality traits, but in the political and social philosophies they attained after recurring personal crises. Both became pacifists and vegetarians, advocated nonviolent resistance to oppression, and ended by rejecting the achievements of civilized European life *in toto*. Professor Green labels this stance "anti-imperialism," which seems a little confusing. Gandhi was a fervent nationalist, while Tolstoy abhorred nationalism. Still, Green's own definition will make his position clearer:

> Tolstoy and Gandhi are the greatest of anti-imperialists precisely because they attacked the sources and roots of empire outside the realm of politics—attacked the very logic of power. These roots include, with varying degrees of importance, almost any kind of cultural triumphalism, or excited grandeur, or dominance and splendor in life. Only a world view that is on principle hostile to all these can be secure against imperialism . . . . Thus the only root of effective anti-imperialism is asceticism.

1 *Tolstoy and Gandhi, Men of Peace: A Biography,* by Martin Green. Basic Books, 319 pages, $23.50

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> And the only men who, in their time, said no to life with real authority were Tolstoy and Gandhi.

There is no doubt that this is essentially true. A renunciation of violence was far from unique to these two figures, pre-eminent though they were. What made their program remarkable was the eventual rejection of all aspects of civilized life—not only the maxim gun and the dreadnought, but the railway, the telephone, and the tennis racket. Peasant and village life were the norm. Within the clustered ants' nests of city and town, men struggled and clamored for worthless prizes in order to satisfy imaginary needs. But what were these tiny, irridescent specks on the earth's broad surface compared with the dignified, patient toil of that vast majority of the human race who continued their unchanging existence working with the beasts and crops that perfectly suffice for all man's true needs?

Tolstoy acknowledged his deep debt to Rousseau, whose works he had devoured as a youth. "I have read the whole of Rousseau," he remarked once, "all his twenty volumes, including his *Dictionary of Music*. I was more than enthusiastic about him, I worshipped him. At the age of fifteen I wore a medallion portrait of him next to my body instead of the Orthodox cross. Many of his pages are so akin to me that it seems to me that I must have written them myself." Like Rousseau, what he rebelled against was not merely the oppression of government—any government—but the unnatural complexity of human relations in modern society. His great novels exalt the spontaneity of elemental human emotions and relationships. What springs from the heart is true, and all great truths are simple ones. Pierre and Natasha, Kutuzov and Karataev, represent the flowing current of existence, which Napoleon and Karenin in their different ways blindly imagine themselves capable of altering to personal or public advantage. Civilization so obfuscates the ingenuous outpouring of the human heart that existence is trapped in an invisible web of artificial constrictions. It is mocked as posturing inanity at Anna Pavlovna Scherer's *soirées,* and exposed as a sinisterly destructive snare in which Anna Karenina is enmeshed and finally destroyed.

In his novels, Tolstoy created a world in which truth and honesty in human relations are exalted. Then came the crisis of his *Confession* in 1879, when he turned against the role of fiction as enlightenment, seeing it instead as yet another example of society's insatiable appetite for frivolous entertainment. Henceforward he would devote himself uncompromisingly to the struggle to re-establish that unselfconscious, elemental existence which he had known as a child and which he now identified with the life of the peasantry.

The struggle, as he seems to have anticipated at the end, was a vain one. The peasantry was to be destroyed entirely as an economic class, and in untold numbers as human beings, by the very revolutionary forces Tolstoy's endeavors unwittingly helped bring to power. The onward march of modern industrial civilization appears on the face of it inexorable, and Tolstoy was no more capable of hindering its advance than was Anna Karenina of stopping the train. Each took the only course consonant with personal integrity, and was destroyed by it.

Gandhi's view of life was similar in many respects to Tolstoy's and had indeed been greatly influenced by his writings. He saw nonviolence as the only rational as well as virtuous means of opposing evil, since violent opposition involved surrender to the enemy's methods and tacitly admitted a lack of conviction in the integrity of the cause. He too eventually turned against almost all manifestations of modern industrial society, partly because it introduced corrupting complications into the fabric of society and also because the more sophisticated machinery threw thousands of home operatives out of work.

For both men the essential was to rid one's mind of complexity and grasp those eternal verities which are essentially simple. "Truth stands," wrote Gandhi, "even though there be no public support. It is self-sustained.

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Truth is perhaps the most important name of God. In fact it is more correct to say that Truth is God than to say that God is Truth." A man who succeeded in making this ideal his way of life could ultimately persuade even his most violent opponents to reconsider their views.

Though each recognized the other's viewpoint on the issue as virtually identical to his own, Tolstoy and Gandhi had arrived at this position by very different ways. Tolstoy was a man of immensely powerful passions, a nobleman (and proud of it), possessed of vigorous sexual drive, changeable, whimsical, and on occasion given to threats or even acts of violence when opposed. His conversion required almost superhuman control over warring emotions and if erratic was surely the more admirable in consequence. It seems likely that his confidence in the efficacy of nonviolent methods stemmed in part from the virtual immunity he enjoyed from government harassment, an immunity deriving from his prestige as an aristocrat and great writer. Moreover, the government, though generally insensitive and often brutal, was not immune to civilized decencies. Tolstoy wrote stern advice to Alexander III and Nicholas II ("I address you in this letter not so much as a tsar but as a man—a brother"), and his wife was able to call on Alexander III and engage in amicable discussion about the censorship of her husband's writings. Such rulers and their representatives, benighted as they were, could not be wholly immune to rational argument and Christian example.

In any case, nothing else could possibly work in view of Russia's bloody past and the violent streak in the Russian character: "even if a change in the existing order were brought about by means of violence," wrote Tolstoy,

> nothing would guarantee that the newly established order would be durable, and that the enemies of this new order would not triumph in favourable circumstances, and by use of the same violence, as has happened over and over again in France and wherever else revolu-

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> tions have occurred. And therefore the new order of things established by violence would have to be constantly supported by that same violence.

There is a pronounced strain of pessimism running through all this, as if Tolstoy were only too aware how close violence lay to the surface even in his own nature. It could not bring peace, and the nonviolent approach *had* to work.

Tolstoy became a saint only by exercise of the most daunting self-control. Gandhi seems to have been a saint by nature. As a boy he had been solitary, shy, obedient, and pious. His nature was warm and equable, and he found little difficulty in loving everyone he encountered regardless of his views. Indeed, so great was his love for humanity at large that personal friends were not markedly distinguished in his affections. He might well have been thought a saint in politics, but he himself emphasized that he was in truth a politician who was trying to become a saint. Despite his reductionist social beliefs he did not, as did Tolstoy, turn his back on the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Gandhi's political objectives were on the whole limited and practical, so practical that to a considerable degree they proved successful, both in South Africa and India. That his methods were so effective was due, it must surely be admitted, as much to the nature of his adversaries' response as to the virtues of his approach.

On the whole the governments in South Africa and India were administered by fair-minded men with a high respect for civilized decencies. Initial contempt for Gandhi as an effete *babu* changed to grudging regard, as his extraordinary courage and rigid observance of principle under the most cruel provocation became apparent. It was contrary to the code professed by the men who administered the Empire to hit a man who refused to strike back, and who unflinchingly returned gentle remonstrance to brutality. Moreover, Gandhi's demands did not challenge any non-negotiable view, as Tolstoy's did. Tolstoy's program required not merely the dismantling of the Russian Empire but also the surrender of private property, a policy acceptable in practical terms to few, and anathema to many.

Gandhi's limited political demands for Indians in South Africa did not threaten any central bastion of the state, and the ultimate future of British India was a continual subject of debate among the British themselves. Ever resourceful in containing native rebellions (a task congenial enough to dashing young public school men bred for the role), they became shamefacedly indecisive when faced with decent, reasonable demands put firmly by a leader whose personal honor stood as high as their own. It is no reflection on Gandhi's integrity to suggest that he was politician enough to perceive that his approach was the most effective from a political point of view. How he would ultimately have reacted had he been faced with a government as cruel as that of the Belgians in the Congo or as ruthless as that of the Germans in East Africa we can never know, any more than we can know how Tolstoy would have viewed the pathetic ineffectiveness of passive resistance to Stalin's war against peasant landholders in the Thirties.

The philosophical outlook of both men bears sufficiently strong identity to deserve a single analysis in depth, and Professor Green's book provides a valiant attempt to achieve this aim. It is the biographical approach, however, which inevitably appears of questionable validity. There is no escaping the fact that Tolstoy and Gandhi were two very different characters, products of very different societies and social classes, men whose achievements lay in very different fields. They only partially overlapped as contemporaries, and Gandhi's survival into the middle of the twentieth century is of crucial importance to the nature of his career.

The fact is surely that Tolstoy's political and social philosophy would be of only marginal interest were it not for his stature

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as a great author. It was the prestige of his fiction that provided the platform from which his views on social reform could be propagated. Of course, this is not all that makes his later work interesting, and the extraordinary internal turmoil of so towering a character must always be of acute human significance. But the fact remains that, however high their moral and aesthetic value, Tolstoy's views on pacifism, anarchism, and the like would have very limited interest today were they not the views of the author of *War and Peace* and *Anna Karenina*. By the same token, we should remember little enough of Gandhi's outlook had he not been the principal architect of the overthrow of the British Raj. That Tolstoy and Gandhi were both great and good men is undeniable, but equally so is the fact that Tolstoy was first and foremost a novelist, and Gandhi primarily a politician.

Professor Green appears uneasily aware of this fact, and so strives to place Tolstoy's *literary* career in parallel to Gandhi's *political* one. This results in a series of extravagantly inappropriate comparisons, which at times become quite absurd. Gandhi's sailing for England in 1888 (largely for the purpose of becoming qualified as a barrister), for example, is compared with Tolstoy's homecoming to the countryside in the same year. It would be tediously invidious to list innumerable similar examples, and one further will suffice:

> Thus, if Tolstoy married at thirty-four and entered into domesticity as a career and a faith as well as a personal relationship, Gandhi at thirty-seven withdrew from marriage, at least sexually, and to some degree from domesticity. He was henceforth engaged not in public work but in a political crusade. Over this period of his youth, he had gradually committed his life to political activism as completely as Tolstoy had committed his to the art of writing; but from now on, Gandhi's politics would be boldly nationalistic.

It is difficult to see any purpose or validity in this comparison, or the significance of the

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coordinating conjunction linking the final clause. Early on in his introduction Professor Green summarizes the parallelism as he sees it, conceding disarmingly that "I have often had to use terms that may seem slightly odd, because they are the only ones that put such disparate phenomena into a single focus."

Many comparisons are so farfetched as to exclude any sensible purpose in undertaking them. The strain on credulity is at times such as to be quite comical. When Gandhi tentatively undertakes some minor gymnastics in his backyard, Professor Green sees a reminder of Tolstoy's exceptional physical strength and drive. When Gandhi in London adopts English clothes and brushes his hair, Professor Green at once recalls Tolstoy's period of aristocratic dandyism at Kazan University.

In defense, it may be said that the style in general often obscures comprehension. Endless breathless parentheses, not always relevant, distract the reader's attention. Sentences like the following can leave an unwary reader's brain reeling like a gyroscope:

> However, it is most likely that the book made its impact by the way that *many* of its features, Tolstoy's face as a whole, met the corresponding features of Gandhi's mind and sensibility (he read "Ivan Ilych," which also moved him deeply, at the same time), both sets of features being animated by an intensity of earnestness hardly to be met with in any other men among the millions who stood between Yasnaya Polyana and Pretoria.

Unfortunately it is not only faulty grammar and inappropriate juxtaposition of episodes that detract from the effectiveness of *Tolstoy and Gandhi*. Factual accuracy is not all that it should be either. Professor Green appears at home in neither the British Empire nor the Russian. References to Kipling miss the mark entirely, as does the epithet WASP when applied to the British governing class. Contrary to the author's assertion, the "spread of Marxism" in Britain was minimal in 1914, and "imperialism" in the nineteenth century meant something quite different from what our author appears to believe. Still less effective are pronouncements on Tolstoy in the context of Imperial Russia. He entirely misses the involuntary note of sarcasm in Tolstoy's address to the Czar in 1881 ("I, an insignificant, unqualified, weak, sinful man . . ."), and one questions whether it would have been safe to refer in his presence to the testy old Count's way of life as "bourgeois." And what would have been Leo's reaction to the neat parallel drawn between his illustrious ancestor Count Peter Tolstoy, Ambassador, Senator, and Privy Councillor, and "Gandhi's grandfather . . . the customs contractor of Porbandar"?

It is hard to criticize adversely a book which is patently the result of enormous industry and enthusiasm (in his introduction, Martin Green explains that the original version was nearly four times as long as the published edition). A photograph on the dustjacket portrays a benevolent figure apparently in the full flow of conducting a seminar at Tufts University. It is not hard to guess that his enthusiasm for his chosen subject is infectious. Unfortunately, the writing of books requires different techniques, and *Tolstoy and Gandhi* reads too much like the near-verbatim script of a succession of lectures, with its warmth of delivery, continual asides, hazardous speculations, and occasional unreflecting blunders.

Ultimately, however, it is less the treatment which is at fault than the whole conception. Many valid comparisons may be made between Tolstoy's and Gandhi's social thinking, which converged at so many important points. But any attempt at integrating two such utterly disparate biographies is doomed to failure. Professor Green would surely have done better, possessed as he clearly is of enormous energy, and enthusiasm, to have written two separate biographies. Better still, as excellent biographies are not lacking, he could have confined himself to one volume on their social teaching.

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Hammett

William F. Nolan Hammett:
A Life at the Edge. Congdon and Weed,
276 pages, $16.95
Diane Johnson Dashiell Hammett:
A Life. Random House,
320 pages, $17.95

reviewed by Dorothy B. Hughes

On the whole writers are clever fellows, or if one must descend to current terminology, clever persons. At best they are intelligent, more often than not styled with wit and possessing understanding of the human scene, comic, tragic, and midway. Why then are biographies about writers such dull pieces?

Perhaps it is because there isn't much to dramatize in someone's clicking away his thoughts on a typewriter or clutching a ballpoint pen over a pad of paper. Pre-twentieth-century writers are excepted, for they are period characters and the period itself whets interest. The attempt to make picaresque the writers of modern times proves only that exploits with bed and bottle are instant tedium.

Dashiell Hammett was a good writer. He cared about the craft. He made this plain in his writings about writing, revealing it also in his letters to publishers and editors and in his critical pieces for the *Saturday Review*. As with most writers, he developed his craft through reading. From boyhood he was an insatiable book reader—a characteristic of born writers—and possessed an unquenchable intellectual curiosity, another characteristic. Although not instantly—apprenticeship must be served—success did come to Hammett quite soon. After he achieved some fame as a "cover writer" for *Black Mask* (possibly the most important pulp magazine of his day), both critical and financial success continued to spiral through the publication of his novels and from them to his position in the top echelon of screenwriters in Hollywood. The question that has plagued literary circles over the years is: Why, after producing five novels in three years, did he stop writing them? (A sixth is listed, but actually it is not a novel. Two novellas which had appeared earlier in *Black Mask* were put together, the two totaling only 38,000 words, and published as a Hammett "novel," not by Alfred Knopf, his publisher, but by a bandwagon house.)

Neither of Hammett's current biographers suggests the simple answer to the question. Hammett was an alcoholic. To repeat the customary cliché, alcoholics are born, not made. Alcoholism is not caused by parental difficulties or a less than perfect environment, although it is common for alcoholics to thus place the blame. But then an alcoholic blames everyone and everything but himself, never himself, for his addiction. Only in recent times has medical research, publicly at any rate, come to the understanding that alcoholism is genetic. Hammett was an alcoholic before he was out of his teens. Not all alcoholics go to the end of the road, but Hammett did.

Hammett was also tubercular. Tuberculosis infects emotionally as well as organically, and the fever of consumption can lead by way of excitement to an almost frenzied affirmation of life. Hammett's compulsive smoking and drinking and gambling, and his satyriasis, are symptoms of the fever. He started on his sexual exploits when young, contracting a venereal disease when he was but twenty years old. His smoking, considered then a lesser sort of destruction, began before he was ten years old: he and a friend stole cigarettes, not having the money to buy them.

As a biographer of Dashiell Hammett, William F. Nolan has done a thorough and workmanlike job. Titled simply *Hammett,* his book is as definitive as any such work can claim to be. Not only does he probe Hammett as a person, but, more important, he discusses Hammett's writing in considerable detail. Nolan's exceptional interest in the author was evident by the late Sixties, at which time he compiled *Dashiell Hammett: A Casebook,* the first book-length treatment of the author. In his more than fifteen years of research, he has uncovered many hitherto

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unrevealed facets of Hammett's life, as well as a knowledge of the man which can come only from indwelling with a subject over a period of time.

Diane Johnson in *Dashiell Hammett: A Life* is more the chatty type of biographer. Nonetheless, through interviews with his family and many of his working associates, she too has accumulated an abundance of new Hammett material. She has, moreover, culled many personal reminiscences from Lillian Hellman, the noted playwright with whom Hammett lived for many years, and has been permitted to include in the book some of the letters they exchanged.

Both biographers devote space to Hammett's military service. In World War I, the disastrous influenza epidemic caused his tuberculosis to become active, a condition which continued at intervals through the rest of his life. In World War II, he was stationed at Adak in the far reaches of the Aleutian Islands and later called this the happiest time of his life. He seemed to experience a curious kind of peace at being isolated from the grand life, at not having to make decisions, not having to be hectored about his work, his immediate needs cared for, and for the most part safely removed from the hazards of high living. Judging from his letters, he was not unhappy in later years when he was jailed for six months for refusing to divulge the names of contributors to the bail fund of the Civil Rights Congress, a Communist front organization. (The fund had given bail for eleven Communist leaders, four of whom immediately decamped, thus throwing the case into the New York courts.) Hammett's prison term was basically like being in the Army or in Army hospitals: men together in a man's world, with all external worries set aside. (His sentence was later reduced to five months "for good behavior.")

Both biographers discuss in some detail Hammett's long association with the Communist Party. Nolan would seem to believe that he was no more than a "fellow traveler." Johnson, on the other hand, does all but place the Party card in his hand. She quotes her mentor, Miss Hellman, as answering the question, "Was he?" with, "I don't know."

He was certainly under Communist discipline from his first meeting with Party members until his death, fronting their organizations, making speeches, writing agitprop articles, teaching in their Jefferson School when in New York, and always at hand to solicit money for "The Cause." He was a big name in Hollywood at the time becoming a Communist was fashionable. Among style-conscious lesser writers there was incessant maneuvering to be invited to join the Party. Admittedly, joining the Party wasn't just fashionable; there went with it the fancy that being associated with rich and famous screenwriters, such as Hammett, might mean that a little of their preeminence and high salaries might drift the neophytes' way. Some of the most unlikely hopefuls made the grade just in time to appear in the multi-columned list given a Los Angeles newspaper by a former member. What neither biographer mentions, either from myopia or deliberately to avoid the subject, was that Hammett's oh-so-great bleeding heart for the poor and downtrodden—which began when, as a Pinkerton strikebreaker for Anaconda Copper in Montana, he witnessed the hardships of the miners—was no more than penny deep. When the money was rolling in almost faster than he could spend it, he lived, in good Americanese, "high on the hog."

Whether in Beverly Hills or New York, his home was in the most expensive hotels, and not for him just a room. Johnson reports that in 1937 he moved into "a grandiose six-bedroom suite" at the Beverly Wilshire. He owed $8,000 when he departed. His liquor bills cannot even be imagined by the normal person. He gambled away exorbitant sums, he entertained with extravagant parties, he employed a full-time chauffeur and limousine and two houseboys. He undoubtedly contributed to the various Communist causes, from the Spanish Loyalists to the poor Russians, after their friend and ally Hitler changed his coat and invaded their country. He was no different from his

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Communist writer friends, who, earning thousands a week, spent the money on capitalist richness. Contributions made not even a ripple on their money ponds.

And, in this same period, the wife Hammett had left behind just managed to take care of herself and their two daughters by scrimping on the pittance he allotted her. In typical alcoholic style, he would on occasion make the grand gesture, overwhelming the two little girls with expensive presents—a ploy by which they remember their father as generous and openhanded—while their mother pared the cheese. In late years, he did buy a little house for her and the girls, not in Bel Air to be sure, where once he acquired a mansion, but rather far south of the tracks, on Purdue Avenue in West Los Angeles. When he was down and out, ignored by his fine friends, he would move in on them until good times returned.

In 1948, after he was hospitalized for delirium tremens, Hammett was told by his doctor that he would be dead in six months if he did not stop drinking. He stopped. He kept his word never to drink again, except maybe one a day "for relaxing," and at times a nightly martini served him by friends who evidently knew no better. He planned to start writing again, but it was too late for him to work his way back to being a writer.

He lived for more than twelve more years, harassed by debt, his income enjoined for back taxes, kept by his friends, his health dwindling year by year. He had long since destroyed his constitution by his way of life. There were heart attacks, a major one in 1955. There was muscle deterioration from alcoholism. There was emphysema and eventually lung cancer. Although not mentioned, only implied, there was the terrible alcoholism weakness of anemia. He had been born in 1894, he died in 1961 just a few months short of his sixty-seventh year. He was a good writer. He does not deserve being institutionalized into a cult. His strength in his craft may be able to withstand it.

Possibly biographies of writers are dull because of the style or lack of it with which

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they are written. As a professional writer, Nolan remains for the most part objective, letting facts prevail. Now and then he does foray into ridiculous Black Maskian purple patches, as on Hammett's quitting school at fourteen, "Now he would learn from life istelf," or the clarion call, "He was a professional. And pros don't quit." Only occasionally does he get on one knee to proffer a bit of hagiography. These intrusions seem to come from an outsider's prodding, "For pages you haven't said how great Hammett is!" As if Hammett deserved adulation rather than respect.

Diane Johnson seemingly is not a professional writer. Judging from her Freudian jabberwocky in the preamble, she knows nothing of the mystery story in general or Hammett's version of it in particular. Her interest quite obviously is not in the writer but in the excelling position he occupied. Among her findings on him are such concoctions as, "You were forlorn, ambitious, deserving but despised, sick unto death, unnoticed, *strapped down with a wife and kids* [my italics: just one of many gratuitous snipings at his wife, Josephine Hammett], coughing your insides out, poor, a nobody . . . . " One can only ask with incredulity: *Whenever?*

She has a disconcerting habit of suddenly switching to the present tense, as if she were writing a treatment for a motion picture script, and back again to past or past-perfect with never a segue. Equally disconcerting is her applying "colorful" adjectives without any conception of the character of the person so adjectived. David Selznick's "covetous eyes" on Hammett. "Wistful" notes from Alfred Knopf. Hammett himself "timidly" thinking of himself as an aspiring writer.

She too contrives gobbets of purple prose with such discoveries about Hammett as, "Abruptly he descended into a suicidal gloom, the gloom of success, when all struggle is behind, and is found to have been for naught." And again, "He presented himself gamely to history and bore its depredations cheerfully, for he had a strange and sweet nature." Whenever she tackles the reminiscences of the two daughters, she adopts a "cutesy" style. And over and over again she does the trick learned from sports commentators wherein they put direct quotes of their own into the mouth of the person of whom they are speaking: ". . . now he's saying 'Shall I pass the ball? Or shall I run it?'" (Where have the editors gone?)

If one can accept and possibly forgive these ineptitudes, Miss Johnson's use of footnotes is intolerable. They stop the reading flow of anyone who bothers to keep referring to them, and they are not necessary. All the worthwhile material in them, with a bit more work, could have been embodied in the text, leaving source references alone to the addendum "Notes."

Someone, sometime has said, "God preserve us from our biographers!" There is no footnote to this statement as I cannot remember who.

The art of the story

C. A. Hankin, editor The Letters of John Middleton Murry to Katherine Mansfield. Constable, 394 pages, $18.95
Katherine Mansfield The Short Stories of Katherine Mansfield. Ecco Press, 688 pages, paperback, $11.95

reviewed by Bruce Bawer

John Middleton Murry met Katherine Mansfield in December of 1911, when he was a callow twenty-one and she was a worldly and self-possessed twenty-two. Both were promising young writers whose careers were in their infancy (he had recently founded a small journal, *Rhythm*; she had published a book of stories) and whose lives revolved around their dedication to literary art ("An ideal of the good life," Murry would write in his 1920 essay "The Function of Criticism," *"must inevitably be aesthetic"*). A strong attraction developed, and in March of 1912 he moved into her London flat, thus beginning an intense, eleven-year-long relation-

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ship—which was not made official, by the way, till 1917.

Despite their genuine love for each other, however, the story of Murry and Mansfield is largely a story of separation. Because of his London commitments (after *Rhythm,* he was editor, in turn, of *The Blue Review, Signature,* and the *Atheneum,* as well as reviewer for the *Westminster Review* and the *Times Literary Supplement*) and her frequent need to be on the Continent (at first for various personal reasons, and later because of her failing health), they spent as much time apart as they did together. Thus we have *The Letters of John Middleton Murry to Katherine Mansfield.* This substantial volume constitutes a comprehensive record of a decade during which both writers produced their major works and established considerable reputations—he as a sober-minded, demi-modernist critic with a taste for the poetry of Thomas Hardy, Edward Thomas, and Wilfred Owen, and she as an increasingly skilled writer of short stories.

In every discussion of the Murrys, the focus has been on Mansfield, and Murry's *Letters* will not do anything to change that. The theme of the typical Murry missive—clumsy, commonplace, and even less witty than one might expect—is worship at the shrine of Katherine (or, as she is usually addressed in these letters, "Wig"). To be sure, from time to time Murry leaves off contemplation of his "darling Wig-wife" long enough to say, "I went to tea . . . to meet those Woolff [sic] people," or "W. H. Davies . . . was here," or "I'm going to supper with Rupert [Brooke] tonight," but we get nary a glimpse of these literary folk. Murry prefers to write love poems to his "Tiggle":

> We are the lovers that were dreamed by God
> When first he set his image on the clay
> And made it man & woman: on that day
> He dreamed a spirit should inspire the clod
> He fashioned human

When Murry is not proclaiming his undying love, he is apologizing profusely for something he said in his last letter that she has interpreted as a slight, or apologizing for something he has just said in *this* letter that he is scared to death will be taken the wrong way, or apologizing for his own failings as man, husband, writer, and correspondent. (His very first letter to her, in fact, closes with the explanation that "the ghastly life I live here" makes it "difficult to be other than dull.") One cannot help but feel for him.

If Murry saw himself as riddled with flaws, he persisted in seeing Mansfield as perfect, in spite of all evidence to the contrary. Indeed, he seems to have created in his mind an ideal Katherine, with only incidental resemblances to the real one. "Of Katherine as an independent being, with fears, hopes, needs of her own," writes Murry's biographer F. A. Lea, "he was scarcely aware."[1] When she took lovers, he seems to have practiced doublethink, forwarding letters from them and yet refusing to believe in their existence. Whenever she decided to go to France for a few months, he was meekly understanding—and even, one senses, a bit relieved. Can it be that he was happier when the real Katherine—who so disturbed his image of the ideal Katherine—was out of sight? Lea suggests that "it was not Katherine he needed but only her love: assured of that, he could subsist on his own indefinitely, 'a monk without a monastery.'" It is hardly an exaggeration to say that in his unnerving, unswerving belief in a fantasy version of his wife, Murry is strikingly reminiscent of Edward Dowell in *The Good Soldier.*

Why was Murry like this? His autobiography *Between Two Worlds* throws some light on the question. Born into a lower-middle-class family—his father was a civil servant—Murry wangled a scholarship to Oxford, won literary prizes, and upon graduation entered the London literary world. But he was never entirely comfortable in the parlors of Bloomsbury; indeed, alongside his peers,

1 Lea's biography is *The Life of John Middleton Murry.* It was published by Oxford University Press in 1960.

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he felt himself to be a "non-entity." "A man with such a feeling of inadequacy," writes Philip Mairet in his study of Murry, "is naturally inclined to seek in others the element in which he feels deficient. He becomes magnetic toward persons who have a superabundance of independence and spontaneity." Thus one may understand Murry's immediate attraction to the self-confident, purposeful Mansfield. Living in her shadow gave him, in some strange way, a sense of identity that he had thitherto sorely lacked. "I love you—you're me," he writes in June, 1913; and in February of the following year, "I need you more than ever: I feel I can't move without you."

Thus when she died in 1923 it was even more traumatic for him than one might expect. C.A. Hankin is not just slinging clichés when she says at the end of the *Letters* that "a part of him . . . died when Katherine Mansfield died." For he spent the remaining thirty-three years of his life seeking an identity. He became, in essence, a political pinball, ricocheting from one system of thought to another in a "fever of zeal" (his words) in which literary criticism, the field for which he had the greatest aptitude, seemed pointless. Obsessed, in turn, by religion ("the man of Nazareth," he wrote in *Things to Come,* "gives point and focus to all my experience and my thinking"), socialism ("the economics of Jesus"), Communism (his book, *The Necessity of Communism,* was widely pilloried), pacifism (just in time for World War II), and conservatism, he steadily lost friends, accumulated enemies, and drove his reputation into the ground. By the time of his death in 1957 his series of tergiversations had made him, in the words of Rayner Heppenstall, "the best-hated man of letters in England."

When he was not propagandizing for the Truth of the Week, Murry played keeper of the flame. During the years after Mansfield's death, he came under increasing critical fire for the speed, indelicacy, and indiscriminateness with which he published the writings she had left behind. One of these volumes is Mansfield's *Journal,* which Murry assembled from forty-four different notebooks and diaries.[2] A lush, pastel, soft-focus montage of Mansfield's personal musings, unposted letters (mostly to Murry), notes on her reading, story fragments, descriptions of landscape and weather, and recollections of long-ago events and recent dreams, the *Journal* offers a diverting, often revealing tour of a writer's mind.

The most important of Murry's compilations, however—and probably the only enduring contribution by either of them to English letters—is of course *The Short Stories of Katherine Mansfield.* Between the covers of this book (which, like the *Journal,* has now been run off, warts and all, from the half-century-old original plates) are some of the most memorable works of short fiction in the language. To read the *Short Stories* from beginning to end is to watch an unexceptional author—little more than an anecdotist, really—develop into a master of her chosen form. Born in Wellington, New Zealand, in 1888, Kathleen Mansfield Beauchamp escaped to England at twenty from what she considered an unsympathetic provincial home, changed her first name and jettisoned her last, and spent the next few years spinning superficial yarns about Prussian stuffed shirts and Edwardian *ingénues.* Though these early stories reveal a knack for description and irony—both fortes of the mature Mansfield—one searches in vain through the first thirty chunks of ore in this book (which contains eighty-eight items in all, fifteen of them fragments) for anything approaching the small, flawless diamonds that the Mansfield mines brought forth regularly in later years. Most of these early pieces are all but devoid of complication, climax, or denouement; the plots are lightweight, the irony heavyhanded. Sometimes *very* heavyhanded. Consider, for example, Mansfield's description (in "The Baron") of the treatment accorded a revered nobleman

2 The Ecco Press has recently brought out, in paperback, the *Journal of Katherine Mansfield,* edited by J. Middleton Murry ($6.95).

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in the dining room of a German pension:

> "The Baron comes once every year," went on the Herr Oberlehrer, "for his nerves. He has never spoken to any of the guests—*yet*." A smile crossed his face. I seemed to see visions of some splendid upheaval of that silence—a dazzling exchange of courtesies in a dim future, a splendid sacrifice of a newspaper to this Exalted One, a "danke schön" to be handed down to future generations.
>
> At that moment the postman, looking like a German army officer, came in with the mail. He threw my letters into my milk pudding, and then turned to a waitress and whispered. She retired hastily. The manager of the pension came in with a little tray. A picture post card was deposited on it, and reverently bowing his head, the manager of the pension carried it to the Baron.
>
> Myself, I felt disappointed that there was not a salute of twenty-five guns.

Thanks to the excessive irony, this sounds less like an excerpt from a short story than like something out of a diary, or some sub-Trollopian travel book. Mansfield at her ten-years-later best would have handled this little scene far more effectively. Out with the first-person commentary in the first paragraph; *auf Wiedersehen* to the milk pudding and twenty-five guns. The result: a passage at least within hailing distance of objective, realistic description—and with just the right touch of irony.

If the early Mansfield too often seems unable to develop conflicts or characters or to avoid intrusive, diary-entry-type irony, perhaps it is because, in a sense, many of these stories *are* diary entries, which do not convey an artist's vision so much as they document her irritation at isolated instances of *impolitesse*. In "A Truthful Adventure," for instance, Mansfield settles the score with a Belgian concierge and boatman who treated her shabbily during a holiday in Bruges. In "Germans at Meat," she records the offensive fatuities of some jingoistic Aryan dinner companions ("'Don't be afraid,' Herr Hoffmann said. 'We don't want England. If we did we would have had her long ago. We really do not want you.'"). "Aren't they horrible!" Mansfield wants us to say when she introduces us to these boobs. And they *are* horrible. But they're one-dimensional, too, and they fade fast beside their author, whose callous condescension and supererogatory sarcasm toward her *dramatis personae* make her come off as much more of a cold fish than any of the barracudas she sinks her hook into. Why—a newcomer to Mansfield's work may well wonder after reading half a dozen or so of these early tales—can't the woman offer at least a hint of the empathy that the greatest writers have for their basest characters? Doesn't she ever rein in the irony, look into the soul, and draw anybody in three dimensions, in close-up—if not with a heart full of love, then at least with a modicum of insight?

The answer, of course, is that she does—eventually. But it took the death of her beloved brother Leslie ("Chummie") in World War I to make it happen. As one may discover in the *Journal,* Chummie's death caused a profound disturbance in his sister's mind, and an equally profound revolution in her art. "I hear his voice in the trees and flowers," she wrote soon after his death, "in scents and light and shadow." The voice told her, apparently, to quit churning out flimsy feuilletons about Europeans she didn't know or care about, and to explore her memories of New Zealand, of Chummie, of childhood. "I feel I have a duty to perform to the lovely time when we were both alive," Mansfield confessed to her *Journal*; "I want to write about it, and he wanted me to . . . . In my thoughts I range with him over all the remembered places." And in her private notebooks she worked out what amounted to a manifesto.

> I want . . . to make our undiscovered country leap into the eyes of the Old World. It must be mysterious, as though floating. It must take the breath. It must be "one of those islands . . . ." I shall tell everything, even of how the laundry-basket squeaked at 75. But all must be told with a sense of mystery, a radiance, an after-

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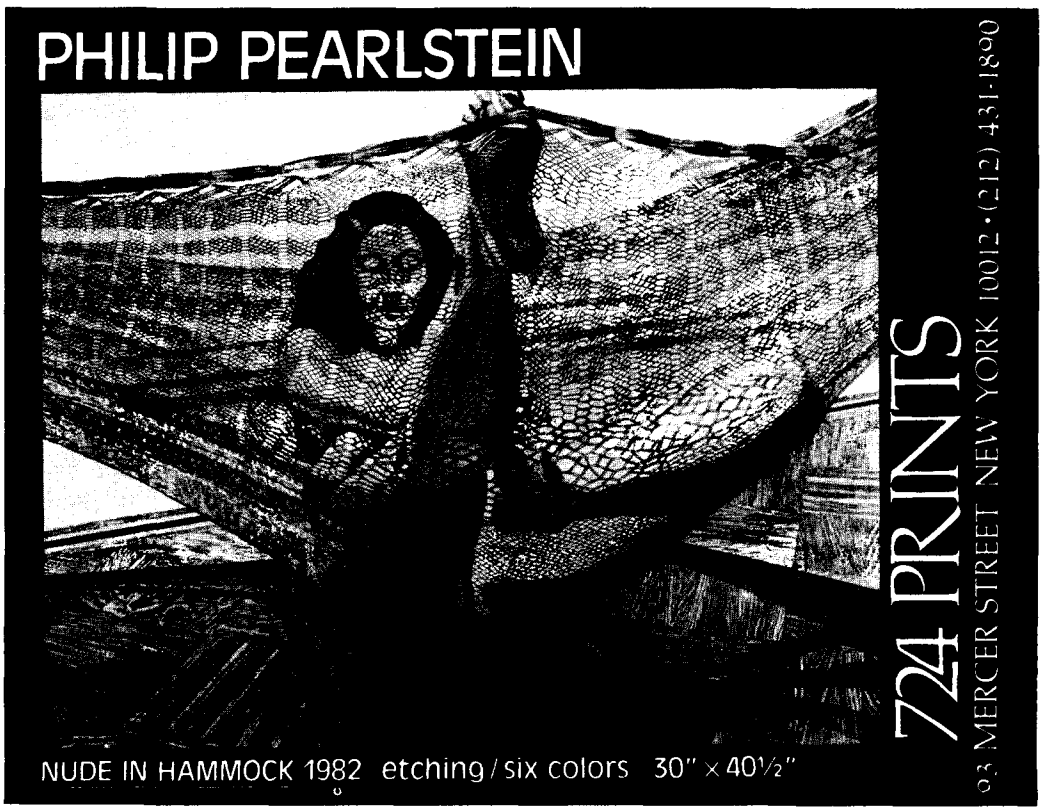
> glow, because you, my little sun of it, are set. You have dropped over the dazzling brim of the world. Now I must play my part.

She played her part by writing her breakthrough story, "Prelude." This series of loosely connected vignettes from her girlhood is surprisingly free of the immoderate irony and implicit self-regard of the early stories. Rather than griping about strangers, she writes with compassion of people she knows intimately: her parents, her siblings, the neighbors of her youth. Yet for all this intimacy, the intrusive, judgmental narrator of her previous stories is nowhere in evidence. Mansfield writes with restraint and (considering her lifelong bitterness toward her parents) stunning objectivity. But the supreme achievement of "Prelude" is that it truly is "told with a sense of mystery, a radiance, an afterglow." Mansfield examines the life of her family by shuttling from consciousness to consciousness (an exception, by the way: virtually every one of Mansfield's stories focuses on a single character) and manages somehow to infuse the prosaic domestic setting with a poetic luster, and to invest the unremarkable dramatic situation with a compelling sense of significance. (Her admirer Virginia Woolf would do much the same thing a decade later in *To the Lighthouse*.) To be sure, this is not to say that "Prelude" is perfect; for though it represents an advance beyond Mansfield's true-anecdote stage, its form is relatively relaxed—closer to that of a chapter from a novel than to that of an exemplary short story.

Yet "Prelude" easily qualifies as the earliest of Mansfield's dozen or so finest stories—among them, "Bliss," "The Doll's House," "A Dill Pickle," and the sequel to "Prelude," "At the Bay." Though Mansfield does not confine herself, in these later stories, to the subject matter of "Prelude," she retains its distinctive tone—the sensitivity without sentiment, the intimacy without authorial intrusion—as well as its "sense of mystery," its "radiance," its "afterglow." What's more, the stories written after "Pre-



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lude" show a rapidly developing command of form and irony. (The advance in form may be due to the influence of Murry, to whom form was a major preoccupation.) In Mansfield's best stories, the irony is expertly controlled and highly effective. Most often, its purpose is not to lampoon sycophantic snobs but—far more subtly—to demonstrate what is perhaps the major theme of these later works: that the lease of human sensitivity, like that of summer, hath all too short a date. In "The Fly," for example, a father mourning his son's death in the Great War thoughtlessly tortures a fly to death, and then forgets what he had been thinking about. In "A Cup of Tea," a terribly wealthy young woman takes a terribly poor young woman home for a cup of tea and decides to "look after" her, only to send her back into the streets when her husband casually mentions the girl's beauty. In "Marriage à la Mode," another rich wife—who has collected a circle of precious, pretentious aesthetes and has joined in their ridiculing of her simple, straightforward husband—is moved to tears by an unexpected love letter from him, but rather than following through on her initial instinct to write back immediately in the same vein, she succumbs to her frivolous friends' entreaties and joins them in a swimming party. What makes these stories valuable is the same quality which is conspicuous by its absence from Mansfield's early stories, and which makes *The Canterbury Tales* more than satire and *Othello* more than a study of evil: the simple, profound humanity that says, This heartless bastard is one of us.

Mansfield's best stories also show her to be an unmitigated realist, convinced of the implacable domination of the imaginary by the material world. Time and again she brings characters absorbed in idealistic reveries gently but firmly back to earth—and to a life full of hurt and loneliness and unanswerable questions. In "Miss Brill," an elderly spinster puts on her fur and goes to a park concert, which she enjoys thinking of as some sort of Platonic drama in which she and the rest of the audience are actors:

> The tune lifted, lifted, the light shone; and it seemed to Miss Brill that in another moment all of them, all the whole company, would begin singing. The young ones, the laughing ones who were moving together, they would begin, and the men's voices, very resolute and brave, would join them. And then she too, she too, and the others on the benches—they would come in with a kind of accompaniment—something low, that scarcely rose or fell, something so beautiful—moving . . . . And Miss Brill's eyes filled with tears and she looked smiling at all the other members of the company. Yes, we understand, we understand, she thought—though what they understood she didn't know.

But she is soon plucked painfully out of her dream of communion. A young couple—whom she chooses to imagine as the "hero and heroine" of the piece—sits down near her and, "soundlessly singing," Miss Brill eavesdrops:

> "No, not now," said the girl. "Not here, I can't."
>
> "But why? Because of that stupid old thing at the end there?" asked the boy. "Why does she come here at all—who wants her? Why doesn't she keep her silly old mug at home?"
>
> "It's her fu-fur which is so funny," giggled the girl. "It's exactly like a fried whiting."
>
> "Ah, be off with you!" said the boy in an angry whisper. Then: "Tell me, ma petite chérie—"
>
> "No, not here," said the girl. "Not *yet*."

As "Miss Brill" depicts the foolish illusions of age, so "Her First Ball" holds the mirror up to the foolish illusions of youth. A pretty girl, reveling in the fantasy of eternal adolescence and and beauty at her first ball, meets a man who tells her that someday she will be one of the "poor old dears" who sit on the sidelines and eat their hearts out because no one wants to kiss them. The girl laughs, "but she did not feel like laughing. Was it—could it all be true? It sounded terribly true. Was this first ball only the beginning of her last ball after all?"

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That youth is the beginning of old age, life the beginning of death, is an *idée fixe* in Mansfield's best stories. This is understandable, since Mansfield wrote all but "Prelude" under a sentence of death. In 1917—only two years after Chummie's death and less than a year after writing that breakthrough story—she was diagnosed as having tuberculosis, and her intense awareness of her approaching death colored the fiction she produced in the six remaining years of her life. Perhaps the best example of the manner in which Mansfield infused her work with a sense of the oneness of life and death is provided by "The Garden-Party." It is the story of Laura, a rich girl who takes a basket of party leftovers to the house of a poor cart driver killed in an accident. Laura feels guilty about having had an orchestra playing dance music in her yard (which is right up the street) on the day of the carter's death, feels guilty about showing up at the working-class cottage in a festive lace dress, feels guilty about bringing fancy hors d'oeuvres to common laborers in mourning. But her discomfort, and her acute sense of class distinctions, vanish when the widow takes her in to view the body:

> There lay a young man, fast asleep—sleeping so soundly, so deeply, that he was far, far away from them both. Oh, so remote, so peaceful. He was dreaming. Never wake him up again. His head was sunk in the pillow, his eyes were closed; they were blind under the closed eyelids. He was given up to his dream. What did garden-parties and baskets and lace frocks matter to him? He was far from all those things. He was wonderful, beautiful. While they were laughing and while the band was playing, this marvel had come to the lane. Happy . . . happy . . . . All is well, said that sleeping face. This is just as it should be. I am content.

Walking home, Laura meets her brother Laurie. "Was it awful?" he asks. "No," she replies.

> "It was simply marvelous. But, Laurie—" She stopped, she looked at her brother. "Isn't life," she stammered, "isn't life—" But what life was she couldn't explain. No matter. He quite understood.
>
> "*Isn't* it, darling?" said Laurie.

The story moves beautifully toward Laura's epiphany, as Joyce would call it. (One is reminded of Joyce's own account of a party and a death: "The Dead.") It is amazing that Mansfield, who less than a decade before writing this story seemed not to know the meaning of the words conflict, climax, and denouement, gives us in "The Garden-Party" not only a lyrical, luminous prose poem about life and death, but a short story whose structure is itself a thing of beauty.

All the same, one can hardly agree with the verdict of Murry, many of whose consistently sincere, naïve, and adoring letters to his wife are concerned with making the same dubious points: that she was one of the very greatest British modernists, "the only *authentic* writer of the present age," and that just about everything she put on paper was a major contribution to the development of twentieth-century literature. The fact is that Mansfield produced her very best work at a very bad time—a time when it could not help but be eclipsed by the work of others. In 1922, for example, when she did her most elegant and distinctive trimming in the garden of English letters (fully half of her dozen best stories were first published in that year), two earthquakes—*Ulysses* and *The Waste Land*—utterly altered the landscape on which that garden grew. Suddenly, elegant and distinctive were passé. And Joyce and Eliot were just the beginning of the problem. Virginia Woolf (who envied Mansfield's style above all others) and D. H. Lawrence (who used Mansfield and Murry as models for Gudrun and Gerald in *Women in Love*) were both sometimes-friends-sometimes-enemies of Mansfield, and there was no question in her mind but that she was their equal, if not their better. She could hardly have guessed that after her death their reputations would rapidly overtake her own. And justly so, we must admit. For though Murry insists, in his introduction to

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the *Short Stories,* that "she responded more completely to life than any writer I have known since D. H. Lawrence," the irrefutable fact is that Mansfield simply does not go as deeply into life as does Lawrence—or Joyce or Eliot or Woolf, for that matter. Mansfield does not care to examine at length the nexus among man and nature and God, or to map the most recondite labyrinths of the human soul. She is not an explorer of subterranean mazes but a digger of wells, who seeks not absolute knowledge but moments of wisdom. She is not a Dostoevsky but (as has been observed countless times) a Chekhov.

However, she is, arguably, a better Chekhov than her friends Woolf and Lawrence are Dostoevskys. She may not be one of the great modernists, but what she does, she does exquisitely. Her dozen best stories are models of form, irony, perception, and sheer craft, and it is for this that we should esteem her. To make greater claims would be unnecessary and unfair. As Lawrence wrote to Murry after her death, "You are *wrong* about Katherine. She was *not* a great genius. She had a charming gift, and a finely cultivated one. But *no more.* And to try, as you do, to make it more is to do her no true service."

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Notebook

Frank Stella at Harvard

by Roger Kimball

The evening of October twelfth was rainy and unpleasant in Cambridge, Massachusetts. But the season's first Norton lecture was well attended nevertheless. Patrons, critics, and practitioners of the arts, their customary retinues in tow, as well as academics and the merely curious, crowded into Harvard's Sanders Theater to hear Frank Stella discourse on Caravaggio and the vocation of painting.

While the name "Stella" undoubtedly accounted for the presence of such luminaries of the art world as Leo Castelli, who was one of Stella's first great supporters, it was the draw of the prestigious lecture series that filled the house. Since their inception in 1925, the Norton lectures have represented the pinnacle of academic enfranchisement for prominent artists and critics. To be named to the Norton chair is to pass into the canon of those whose work one no longer merely reads or listens to or looks at but whose work one *teaches*; and, especially in the arts, to be included in the curriculum alongside acknowledged past masters is arguably the academy's highest form of praise. Previous holders of the Norton chair include T. S. Eliot, whose Norton lectures became *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism,* Stravinsky *(The Poetics of Music),* Lionel Trilling *(Sincerity and Authenticity),* Ben Shahn *(The Shape of Content),* and many others of similar repute.

Born in 1936, Stella is the youngest Charles Eliot Norton Professor of Poetry to date ("poetry" is construed broadly to comprise "all poetic expression in language, music, the fine arts, and architecture"). It is perhaps ironical that Harvard should choose for this most traditional, humanistically oriented position an artist who, in an oft-quoted 1964 interview, reproached those "who want to retain the old values in painting—the old humanistic values that they always find on the canvas. If you pin them down, they always end up asserting that there is something there besides the paint on the canvas. My painting is based on the fact that only what can be seen *is* there. It really is an object."

One might suggest that, on the contrary, Stella's appointment merely illustrates tradition's power to assimilate the professedly non- or anti-traditional, so that what seemed radical in 1964 is commonplace in 1983. This is true enough, though one reason this happens so regularly is that most of what comes to be recognized as art, no matter how radical its rhetoric, continues to move on a map drawn by the very tradition that it seeks to subvert. In challenging tradition, art expands rather than escapes tradition's rule.

But Stella was a natural candidate on other grounds. Since his debut in the art world in 1959 with the celebrated "black paintings," he has again and again shown himself to be one of the most thoughtful and visually fastidious artists to arise since the eclipse of Abstract Expressionism. And, what is per-

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haps equally important, he is one of the most verbally articulate contemporary artists to champion the cause of abstract art.

Stella is scheduled to give the usual six lectures over the course of the academic year. Under the general rubric "Working Space," he will proceed from Caravaggio to highlight other figures in the pantheon of art, including Rubens, Kandinsky, and Picasso. But one gathered from the first installment that he will be primarily interested in relating such historical inquiries to the concerns of contemporary abstract painting. Indeed, part of the burden of this first lecture was to reaffirm the legitimacy of abstract art by insisting that its characteristic ambitions did not spring full-grown from the heads of Kandinsky and Mondrian but have a long and distinguished pedigree.

For those familiar with Stella's reflections on art, the lecture presented no real surprises. But, as those reflections have generally consisted of rather brief explanations in interviews or remarks to accompany a show, it was rewarding to see him apply himself in a sustained way to a single topic. Not that this was a simple matter even here: Stella speaks softly and very quickly, often swallowing the last word or two of a sentence. But he also tends to repeat his main ideas in various formulations, and over the course of the evening his argument became clear enough.

Abstract painting, Stella suggested, is in crisis. After the achievements of Mondrian and Color-field abstraction, painting seemed to lose its way. Not only has it become increasingly difficult to envision a vital future for abstraction but, perhaps even more significantly, it is difficult to relate it to a meaningful past that extends back much beyond the early twentieth century. In this sense, the current crisis in painting is said to parallel a crisis that occurred near the end of the sixteenth century with the death of Titian. Hence, Stella calls for a new Caravaggio to fill the void. For just as Caravaggio reinvigorated painting through his new treatment of space, so too painting's task today is to discover "a new pictoriality," a new sense of space, that is not determined by extra-artistic considerations. "After all," Stella argues, "the aim of art is to make space, space that is not compromised by decoration or illustration, space in which the subject of painting can live. This is what painting has always been about."

The last part of this statement becomes more credible when we realize that for Stella painting did not really come of age until the Renaissance, when the reconstruction of space according to one-point perspective gained dominance. The creation of such autonomous "working space" is Stella's real subject. For him, the problem of painting is not so much the problem of representing a three-dimensional object on a two-dimensional plane but the use of "convincing illusionism" to make pictorial space seem real. According to Stella, painting should not confine itself to the picture plane (thus enslaving itself to "the tyranny of the perimeter") but should seek to create a "communicable whole," a "sense of absolutely convincing reality" that is capable of "making figuration look real and free." (One recalls Kant's observation that "beautiful art must *look* like nature, although we are conscious of it as art.") Adopting a phrase from Berenson, Stella describes Caravaggio as a premier "space composer," meaning by that term not a composing *in* space but a composing *of* space. Dreaming of making painting "an enterprise that is independent and self-contained," he praises Caravaggio for living up to the post-Renaissance artist's "new-found responsibility" to create his own space, "space with a special self-centered character." By steadfastly exploring this space, Caravaggio "made the studio into a place of magic and mystery, a cathedral of the self."

Stella's way of putting the matter may obscure the extent to which his interpretation of Caravaggio accords with other, more traditional interpretations. For example, in his classic *Caravaggio Studies,* Walter Friedlaender observes apropos the Vatican *Deposition* that we "no longer look into a fictitious

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world set apart by design, color, and light; the entire construction seems to come physically toward us as if entering step by step into our world. We are the recipients of the miracle." But unlike Stella, who stresses the autonomy of Caravaggio's art, Friedlaender notes "a kind of antinomy in the later works of Caravaggio: the figures and objects are by their arrangement made to reach out almost palpably to the immediate perception of the spectator, while the strong and inexplicable light fills them with a sublimity which keeps the worshipper in a state of awe." For Friedlaender, the sense of autonomous space communicated by Caravaggio's paintings is undercut by its allegiance to a reality outside the aesthetic sphere. Caravaggio remains essentially a religious artist.

Stella's description of Caravaggio's studio as a "cathedral of the self," drawing as it does on the traditional figure of the artist as a "second god," is no doubt in part hyperbole. But like most hyperbole, such talk is exorbitant language striving to express an exorbitant claim. For Stella's obsession with autonomous pictorial space is more than a formal, academic concern. The ineffable subject of painting—"what is not there, what we can't quite find, but which at the same time we can't stop looking for"—is for him inextricably bound up with an uneasiness about finitude and mortality. "Painters instinctively look to the mirror for reassurance," he tells us, "hoping to shake death, hoping to avoid despair of passing time." And if their hopes must inevitably be disappointed, then art, with its beautiful, self-sufficient creations, can nevertheless assuage that disappointment by inviting us to forget, if but momentarily, the burdens of finitude and self-consciousness.

Stella's presentation was considerably more textured, witty, and ironical than I have suggested here, always emphasizing the impossibility of the release from time that painters are, on his account, condemned to seek. Nevertheless, it was this urgent theme that recurred most often in the course of his exposition and that seemed to impress his audience most deeply. At a

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reception following the lecture, I asked a student from Boston's Museum School what she thought of Stella's presentation. On the whole, she was carefully noncommital, but clearly felt that he was on to something with the idea of the studio being a "cathedral of the self." "Art *is* a personal religion," she asserted, ignoring the oxymoron, but added darkly, "though sometimes it seems hell-bound."

My pleas for elaboration were fruitless, though in this context it is illuminating to compare Stella's understanding of painting with the account of painting Alberti gave in *On Painting* (1435). According to Alberti, painting—understood essentially as the skillful fixing of images seen as if reflected in a mirror—"contains a divine force" that lets one forget the passing of time and can make the absent seem present, the dead alive. Thus the accomplished artist "sets himself up almost as a god," feels himself to be "another god." Nor is it without interest here that Alberti credits Narcissus with the invention of painting. "The story of Narcissus is most to the point," for "what else can you call painting but a similar embracing with art of what is presented on the surface of the water in the fountain?" Just as Narcissus, having turned away from Echo's love, sought to embrace the glittering, inaccessible image projected on the pond, so the painter, turning away from the immediately given, seeks to embrace the measured image with which he reconstructs the visible world.

Though he repeatedly claims to take his distinctions "from nature," Alberti in fact presents us with a view of art in which nature is systematically subordinated to the demands of the human spirit. Painting for Alberti—as, in a more radical way, for Stella—does not so much reveal as remake reality. It represents man's triumph over otherness in the construction of an autonomous "work of space" that, resisting the indifferent voracity of time, gives its creator a sense of godlike sovereignty. Caravaggio's success in communicating a sense of such space is what makes him so important a precursor for Stella. In Caravaggio, Stella found the beginnings of that "new pictoriality," free from "decoration or illustration," free from dependence on any content outside itself, that much contemporary art is still searching for.

To teach the administrators art

by Samuel Lipman

James Burnham's famous *Managerial Revolution* (1941), by detailing the transfer of power over society from capitalists to managers, ought to have prepared even the art public for the inevitable. What makes the arts go today isn't art and it isn't artists; it isn't (socialists and other all-knowing types to the contrary) the financial power of patrons or even the pressures of a boorish mass audience. It is rather a thriving, confident, well-paid—and well-expense-accounted—class of administrators.

Whether these administrators work in opera companies, symphony orchestras, museums, foundations, government agencies, or the numerous powerful advocacy groups funded by all these institutions, it is they who bring us the art we see and hear, and they who mediate the encounter between artists and patrons, artists and audience, and audience and patrons. In music, these administrators choose composers, conductors, and soloists. In the visual arts, they choose the exhibitions that make small reputations big and great reputations greater. In foundations and government, administrators establish which programs are to be supported, and then select the experts who bear the putative responsibility for what is to be done.

Given the very real shift in power toward administrators so apparent today, art lovers are quite justified in wondering about the aesthetic basis on which decisions about our cultural agenda are being made. Fortunately, an article in the August 1983 issue of the *Research & Information Bulletin* of the National Council of Art Administrators pro-

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vides some light on this hitherto murky subject. In this article, James Hutchens, who teaches arts administration and arts education at Ohio State University, addresses the problem of educating those who are responsible for arranging the supply of beauty to a trusting public. Professor Hutchens deplores the fact that our cultural bureaucrats have other than aesthetic priorities in school:

> A review of current programs in arts administration points out the glaring deficiency of aesthetic education for students in these programs. The emphasis on business management practices and the omission of the aesthetic orientation in the education of our future arts administrators is especially clear in a recent survey published by the Center for Arts Administration at the University of Wisconsin (Spisto, Leslie & Prieve, 1979). Sixty percent of the existing arts administration programs surveyed in that publication were in schools or colleges of business administration. Another survey of 128 arts organizations on the question of how students should be prepared for positions in arts administration revealed even more discouraging results. Study in the following areas was ranked very important by the indicated percentage of respondents to that study: accounting (63%), marketing (63%), human relations (61%), public relations (47%), promotional strategy (44%), and political science (13%). On the question of the necessity of specific knowledge of the arts and aesthetics for future arts administrators, respondents indicated this was less important for students seeking a graduate degree. For the student seeking an undergraduate degree in arts administration, specific knowledge in arts and aesthetics was rated as *unnecessary*. [Emphasis in the original.]

One can only applaud Professor Hutchens's attempt to point out that, even in marketing, the nature of what is sold is more important than the process of putting it over on the buyer. But to recognize this truth is not enough; one must then have some idea of just what the *art* that administrators deal in should be. Here, unfortunately, Professor Hutchens occupies highly dubious ground. This is what he thinks ought to be at the heart of an attempt to "place equal focus on the aesthetic needs of people (artists and audiences) served by arts organizations as well as on managerial processes":

> Ursula Meyer, in her introduction to *Conceptual Art,* remarks: "The physicist J. Robert Oppenheimer's comment on science applies as well to art: There have been more discoveries during the past few decades than during all the preceding centuries" (1972, p. xv). Since the seminal work of Marcel Duchamp at the turn of the century there have been numerous attacks on the art object—both the traditional aesthetics associated with the production of art objects and the sale and distribution of art as a valuable commodity for the elite classes of society. Conceptual art appears to be the logical heir to this tradition, and the ideas associated with it have influenced artists working in many of the areas referenced above—concrete art, environmental art, happenings, performance art, et al. In addition, cross-fertilization with other fields and the exploration of the aesthetic dimensions of science have been encouraged by conceptual artists. Recognition by future arts administrators that an information explosion has occurred in the arts is a necessary first step in understanding the work of artists whose appeal is often limited to a relatively small audience.

Perhaps Professor Hutchens's problem could be simply solved. For example, lectureships for Christo and Laurie Anderson at graduate programs in arts administration might go a long way toward uniting the warring realms of commerce and culture. Considered more seriously, however, Professor Hutchens's potted history of anti-art art, extending as it does from a misdated account of Duchamp's work in the second and third decades of this century to today's "Next Wave" posturings, cannot possibly provide administrators with what they now (on Professor Hutchens's own testimony) so sorely lack: knowledge of the great work of the past, discrimination in separating the

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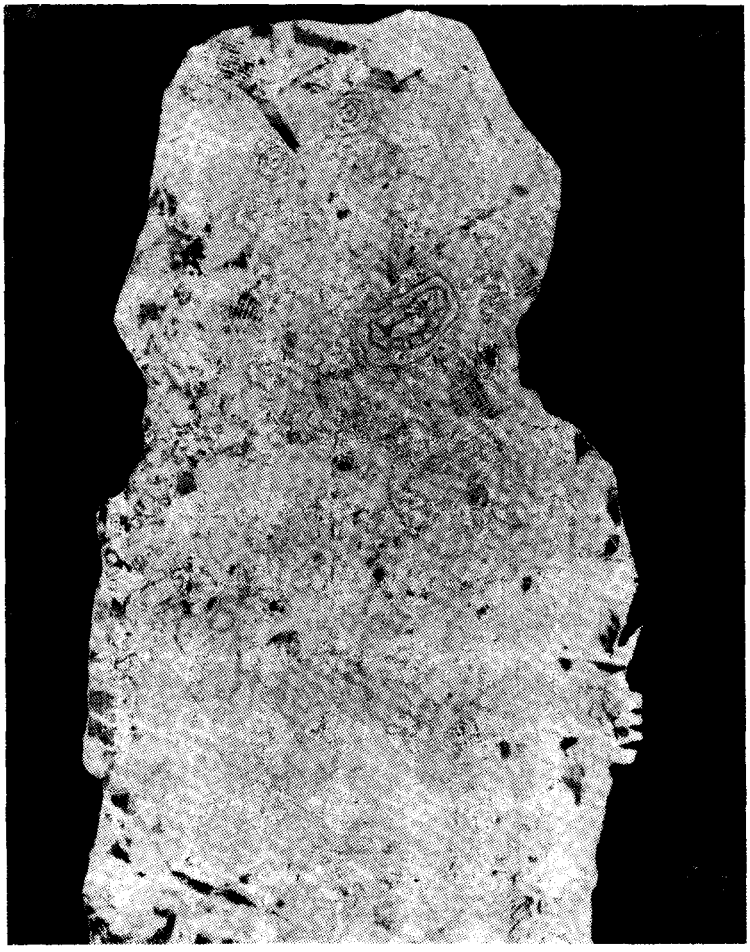

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wheat of contemporary creation from the chaff of media-made reputations, and courage in defending the idea of art as an autonomous realm of human intellectual activity. Professor Hutchens would seem to be telling administrators to embrace the fads of our time. The problem, on the contrary, is not to embrace these fads, but to resist them.

How, then, can arts administrators be given the solid core of culture and spirit they badly need? It is clear that this necessary task will not be accomplished by treating administration and management according to the curricula of prestigious graduate schools of business, as a universally applicable body of learning to be applied by faceless and interchangeable whiz kids. The proper training for arts administrators is not in the first instance administration and the allied skills of marketing and fund raising. The proper training of arts administrators is first *art*—in its practice, its history, and its particularity. Doubtless it will be said that such a course would amount to putting arts administration into the hands of artists, who, by definition, don't know anything about money. A silly response indeed. No one who knows anything about art and its history could possibly think anything so foolish.

Auden remembered

by Robert Richman

Although the commemoration in New York of the tenth anniversary of W. H. Auden's death was a touching way for the poet's many friends and admirers to honor his memory, it also offered the chance for others to reconsider Auden's work. "I think that he was the greatest poet in the English language in this century," declared Joseph Brodsky, the Russian émigré poet. It was Brodsky's idea to organize the week-long tribute, which was jointly sponsored by The New York Institute for the Humanities and the American Academy of Poets. The events included a Requiem Mass at the Cathedral of St. John the Divine, a reading by contemporary poets of their favorite Auden poems at the Guggenheim Museum, a screening of *The Rake's Progress,* a symposium on Auden's legacy at New York University, and the placing of a plaque at Auden's old home on St. Mark's Place.

J. D. McClatchy, the poet, and Edward Mendelson, Auden's literary executor, attempted to explain, at the NYU symposium, why Brodsky's high estimate is not now generally shared. The reasons cited included an indifferent academy, the American mistrust of a foreigner, and the young, to whom Auden is said to appear as something of an old fogey. But one came away from this "Auden Week" with a quite different understanding of why Auden's place in the poetic firmament is not what it used to be. Unexpectedly, it was in the telling reminiscences of Auden's oldest friends, Sir Stephen Spender and Christopher Isherwood, and in the remarkable readings of Auden's poetry by the impressive spectrum of poets gathered at the Guggenheim, that one was given the clue.

What was revealed, above all, was the unseriousness—the "masquerade" and "charade," to use Isherwood's words—which was said to be at the core of Auden's protean personality. "Camp," said the eighty-year-old Isherwood, "is one of the most useful words in the English language," and it was intoned again and again to describe the attitudes of the man who had been Isherwood's mentor for over sixty years. "The whole idea of him being a great poet," remarked Isherwood, "was [to us] sort of ridiculous." Spender's comments, though not as direct as Isherwood's, left the same impression. He spoke of the ease with which Auden cut himself loose from his English "roots" to take up expatriate residence in New York City in 1939. As firmly "rooted in the landscape of northern England" as Auden was, said Spender, he had no trouble "becoming rooted again" in America. "Rootlessness," continued Spender, "can only be an adopted pose." Ursula Niebuhr, another symposiast, was hard pressed to convince her listeners of Auden's seriousness about the religious be-

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liefs he adopted in mid-career. Most of her recollections—like the one where Auden, as a gag, dressed up as a bishop once during his years as a believer—argued the opposite point.

Mr. McClatchy spoke of the wide "range" of subjects in Auden's poetry which "relieves him of the mystique of high seriousness." "Seriousness never dogged Auden" and thus the poet remained "beyond Eliot's rhetoric and Pound's glamour." Auden "rubbed against the American grain," McClatchy said, which explains why to this day Auden is an "acquired taste." "Wasn't there a provisional nature to his beliefs?" asked McClatchy of Isherwood. "Yes, he always tried things on for size," Isherwood responded.

No doubt this core of uncertainty spilling over into facetiousness lends ambivalence to some of Auden's poetry and inscrutability to his poetic voice. For many of the poets at the Guggenheim reading, this seemed to be a warrant for reading anything—or nothing—into his poems. Nearly all the readers (including John Ashbery, Joseph Brodsky, Amy Clampitt, Alfred Corn, John Hollander, James Merrill, Anthony Hecht, Richard Howard, Howard Moss, Mona Van Duyn, May Swenson, Marilyn Hacker, and Derek Wolcott) transformed the poems they chose to read, with an Auden-like casualness, into nothing so much as poems of their own. Auden's voice was never really heard until the end of the evening, when a recording was played. Strangely, it didn't seem to matter. This, more than anything else during "Auden Week," seemed to suggest why this gifted and productive poet has been relegated outside the kind of serious consideration Mendelson and McClatchy might want for him. Whether it was Ashbery undoing the ballad "As I walked out one evening" with his flat, nasal, uninflected rendering, or Brodsky turning "September 1, 1939" into an incredibly moving Russian lament, or Mona Van Duyn boldly reinstating the lines Auden cut from the final version of "In Memory of W. B. Yeats," it all seemed as if a curious kind of critical justice was being done to this poet, whose poetic achievement, because of this malleability, was not so high as his talent might have allowed. All the same, one would have expected more acknowledgment of Auden as a serious figure than he received. "The words of the dead man / Are modified in the guts of the living," wrote Auden in his poem about Yeats, and it was true.

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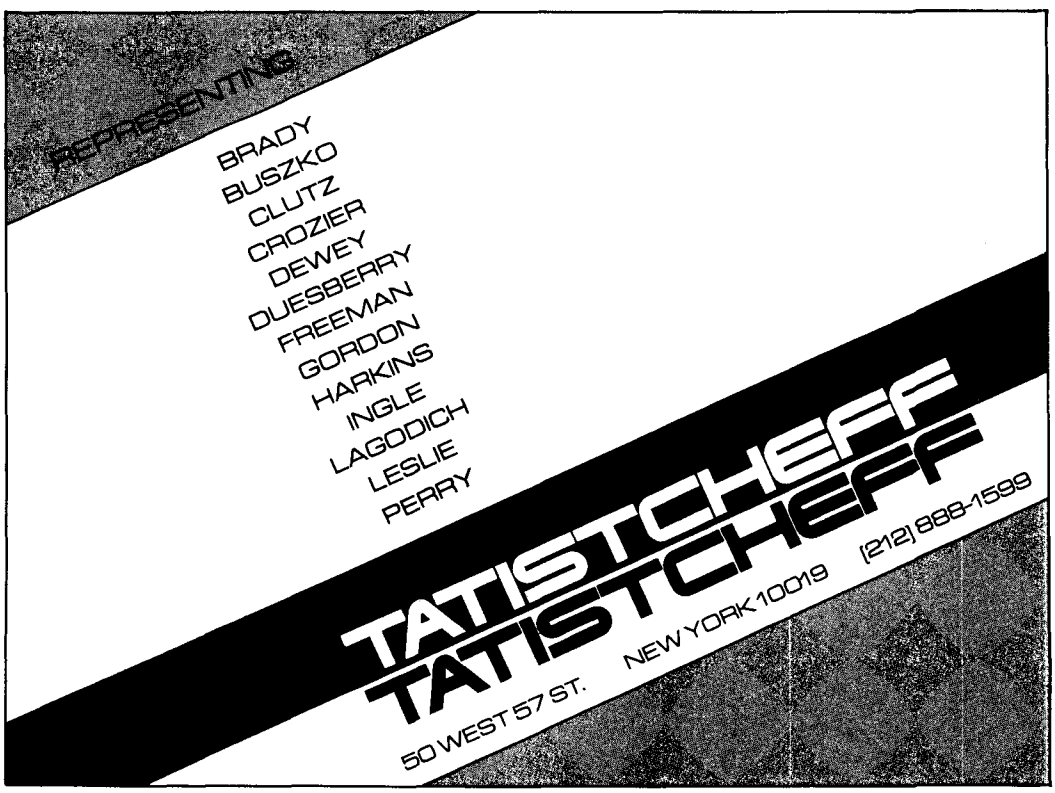

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Letters

Poetry and power

To the Editors:
In the June, 1983, issue of *The New Criterion,* Stanislaw Barańczak reviewed Czeslaw Milosz's book *The Witness of Poetry* . . . . Mr. Baránczak quotes Milosz saying that poetry can sometimes "save nations or people," and draws from that a conclusion that "in countries such as Poland contemporary poetry more than once proved indispensable to society's existence; its role as a witness to reality, a defense against oppression, and a source of hope is not an abstract axiom but the concrete and personal experience of many people."

I personally cannot say for how many people poetry plays this role, but I have a sad feeling that it would not be a difficult task to count them. As for the whole idea, it belongs, when confronted with the reality of the contemporary world, to the category of "wishful thinking.". . .

It is true that Milosz's poems were printed in workers' newsletters during strikes in August, 1980, in Gdansk, and probably all over the country. It is also true that they were often next to "unionist appeals and political analyses," but that's the end. Apparently Mr. Barańczak is trying to suggest that there was an immediate relation between the two kinds of writing. There was one indeed, but it had much more to do with the poet than with his works. Although already a legend in literary circles, Czeslaw Milosz was virtually unknown to the general reading public in Poland at this time—especially to workers in the Gdansk shipyards. (He was only mentioned occasionally in literary magazines as one of the emigrant poets, or referred to warmly by the late Jerzy Andrzejewski in his weekly column in "Literature.")

I remember vividly the afternoon when I heard on the radio the news of Milosz's Nobel Prize. I went back to my students and told them the news only to learn that none of them even knew his name. They were medical students, true, and one can imagine that perhaps students of Polish literature would be more knowledgeable. But even so they were twenty-five young, intelligent, and well-educated Poles who knew nothing of our greatest living poet. I believe this illustrates well Milosz's position in Polish cultural life before the Nobel Prize. It was obviously a terrible and sad result of a cultural policy of the state where every form of intellectual activity is supposed to support an official ideology and therefore remains under strict control.

As far as I can judge on the basis of my observations and experience from Gdansk at that time, Czeslaw Milosz after he received the prize became immediately a symbol of Polish culture, and, next to the Pope, the main source of our pride and dignity. He also gave an extraordinary support and moral justification to Poles who have chosen to emigrate, and brought dignity to their decision even in the eyes of confused readers of daily propaganda in Poland, where the freedom of choosing a place to live as well as freedom of expression of ideas are practically forbidden, although formally legal. It is a rule of thumb that it takes decades of a constant presence in the cultural circuit of the nation for a poet to establish

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himself to some extent as a "conscience of a nation." But that is another romantic myth much treasured by us Poles. In the period before the Solidarity epoch but after the decision in Stockholm, only twenty thousand volumes of Milosz's poetry had been published, which meant that they were absolutely unavailable to the common reader (which I consider myself to be). Later, when Solidarity became a major political force in the country, more than a hundred thousand volumes of his poetry were published—a significant number for a nation of thirty-five million. Milosz has a right to be proud of this. However, one has to remember that the people who made long lines in front of bookstores were trying to obtain a sort of contemporary reliquary, possession of which would make their own miserable and difficult lives a little bit brighter. It is needless to add that all that happened long after the Solidarity ideology came to the peak of its influence . . . .

Czeslaw Milosz is one of the three people whom the average Pole respects most and probably one of the few Poles whom an average foreigner has heard of. He already has his place in the history of our country. He also has a place in the hearts of Poles—and not only because they are proud of him and his achievements and find in him a basis for their own pride. One of his poems, "You Wronged a Simple Man," became almost an anthem during the short period of hope in Poland. It will remain fixed in our collective mind as firmly as the first few words of Adam Mickiewicz's "Pan Tadeusz" ("Lithuania, my homeland, you are as health . . ."). It will certainly take Milosz time to reach the place in Polish culture that he deserves—perhaps next to Mickiewicz, perhaps not. Milosz is a great Pole and an important poet of our time, but there is no need to credit him and his poetry with an influence that is not his and that perhaps he himself would not wish to be credited with.

Andrzej J. Stankiewicz
Allston, Massachusetts

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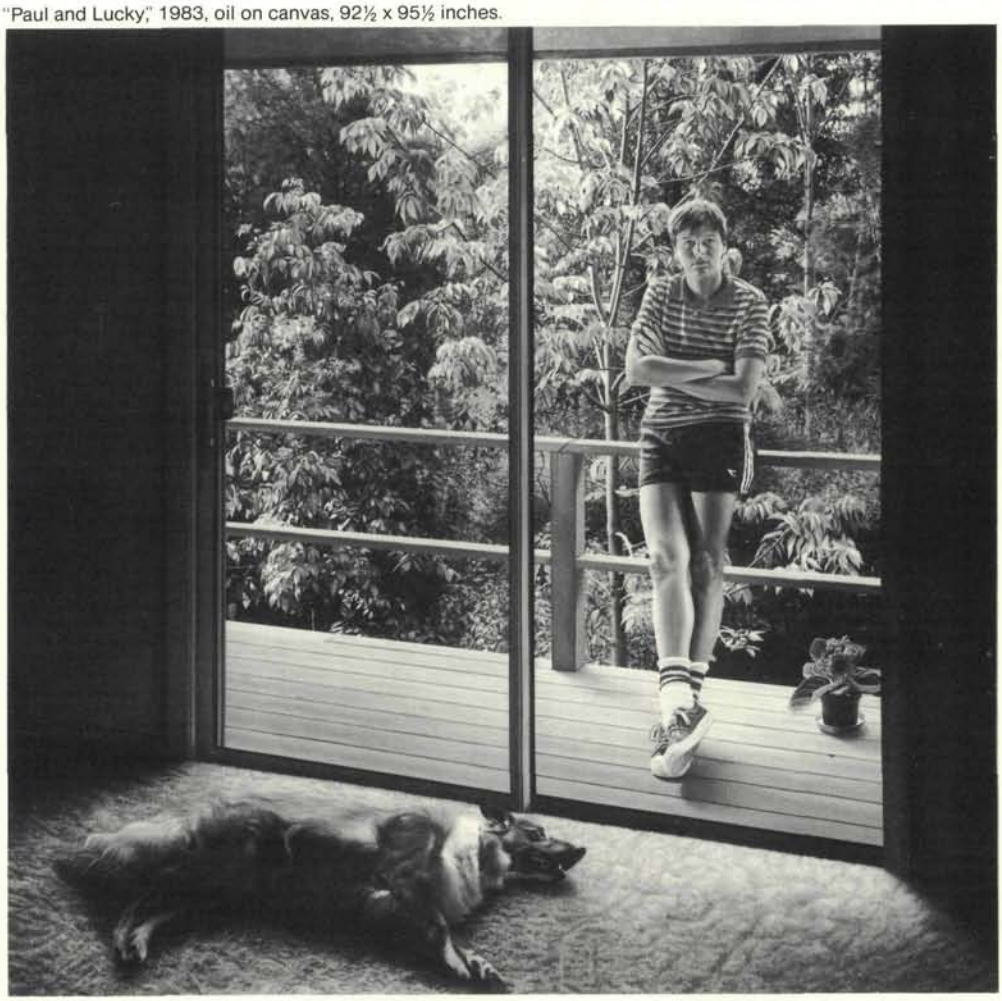
"Paul and Lucky," 1983, oil on canvas, 92½ x 95½ inches.



JAMES VALERIO

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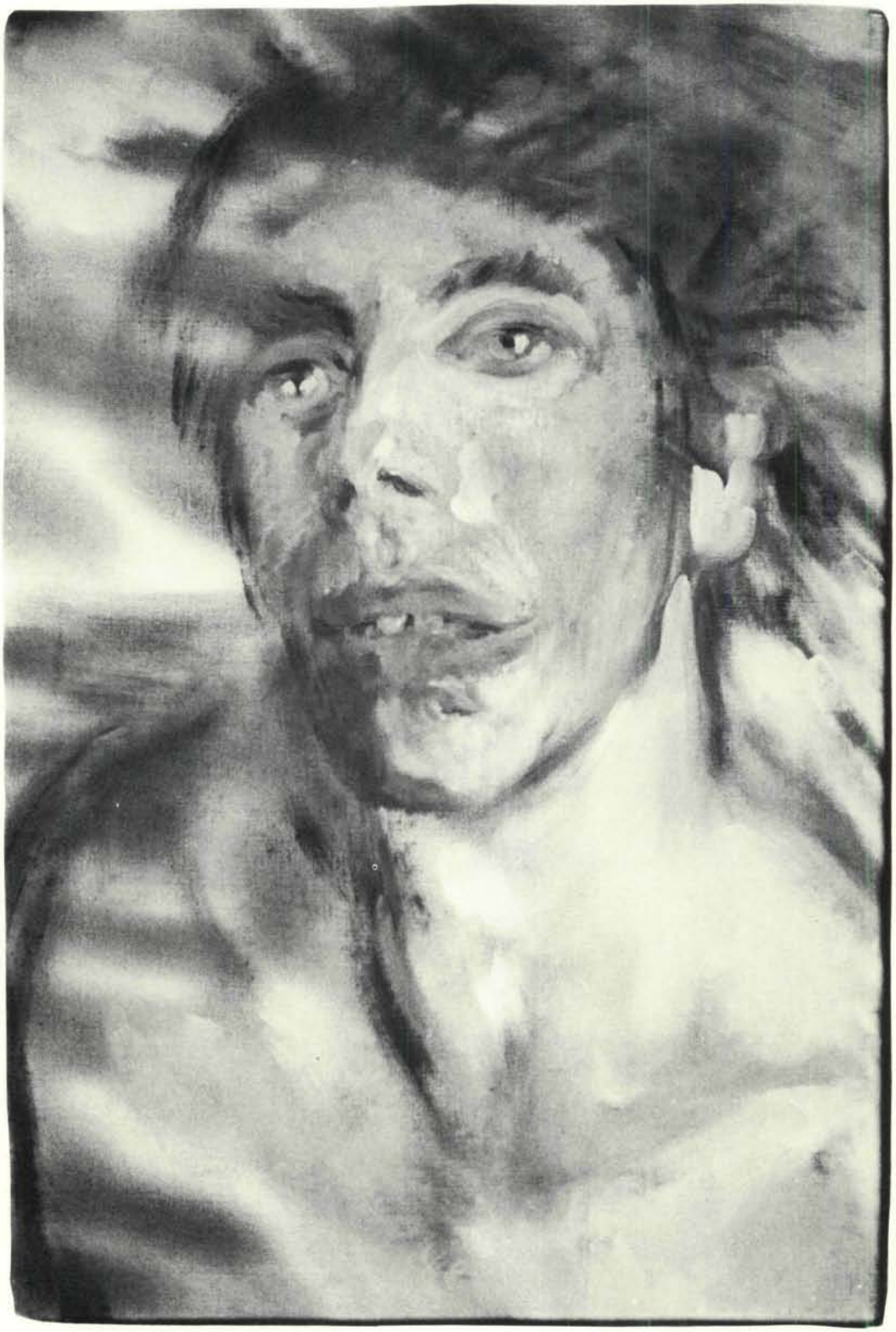

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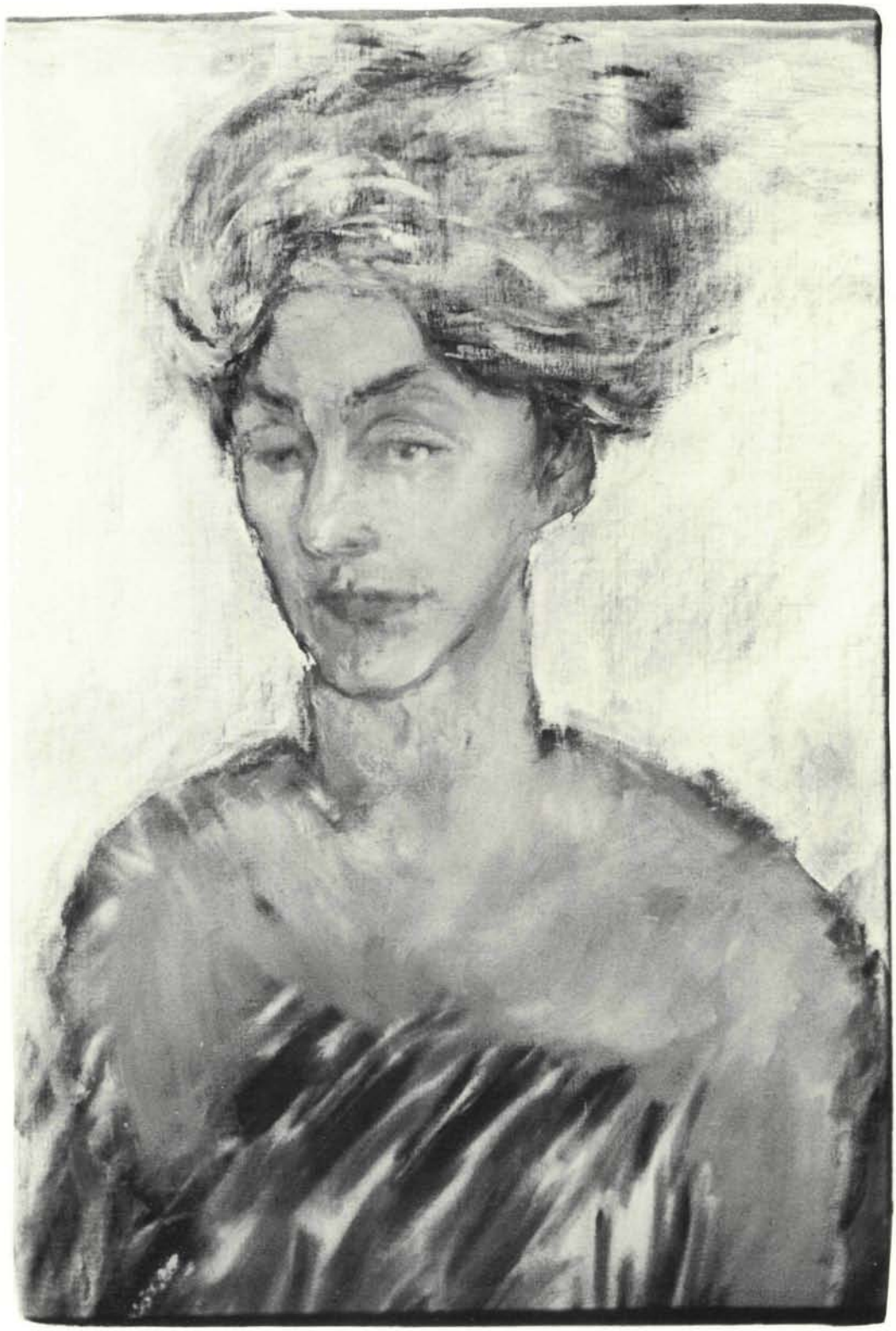

DECEMBER 30-JANUARY 18

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Lady on the Beach, 1917, oil on canvas, 29⅛ x 18 inches

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